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Vol. L.



OR,
Desperate Durg's Desperate Scheme.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "HUSTLER HARRY," "CAPTAIN
NAMELESS," "OLD DISMAL, THE RANGE
TRAMP," "COLONEL COOL," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DESPERATE WOMAN.

"STOP where you are! I will shoot the first man who advances!"

Clear and distinct the words came from the lips of a beautiful young woman, and they were emphasized by the double click of a small revolver held in one gloved hand.

The three ruffianly-looking men whom she confronted drew rein so sharply that their foam-covered horses were thrown back upon their haunches, but chuckles of villainous satisfaction broke from their lips.

"I mean business," added the girl-woman resolutely. "This little weapon is loaded, and if you do not keep your distance, you will discover I can use it. I am desperate."

DOWN—DOWN PLUNGED THE SUPERB HORSE, AND DESPERATE DURG, HIS RIDER!

She looked desperate indeed. Her face was very white and hard set, while her black eyes flashed ominously. Her riding habit was covered with dust, as if she had ridden at a furious pace, if not a long distance. The appearance of the horse upon which she sat testified to this, for, covered with dust-laden sweat, it stood with lowered head and heaving flanks, its aspect that of utter exhaustion.

That the three fellows who blocked her path were rascals was plain, for their appearance was that of evil men. The one who seemed to be the leader was dressed something like a gentleman, but there was a crafty, treacherous look upon his smooth face that plainly betrayed his true nature.

The other two were attired in half-cowboy costumes, and made a great display of weapons in the belts around their waists. One was a huge, broad-shouldered fellow, with a shaggy beard and an eye that had a reddish gleam unpleasant to see. He wore a heavy black mustache and a long, pointed imperial, giving him a fierce and repellent air, in which he seemed to delight.

The third was a short, squat individual, with the map of Ireland traced on his face, which was covered by a short bristling red beard. He wore an habitual grin that displayed two rows of wolfish teeth.

"My dear girl," entreated the smooth-faced leader, rubbing his thin hands together and passing them over each other as if in the act of washing, "I do hope you will not be foolish about this matter. You cannot escape us now if you try."

The girl lifted her head proudly, a look of deepest scorn on her fair face.

"So you think you have me in your power? Well, you may learn you have made a mistake. I have escaped from your clutches once, and I shall not be taken again while I live."

"Oh, come now!" protested the smooth-faced rascal; "do be sensible! We are bound to retake you, anyway, and if you resist it will simply make it more unpleasant for yourself. It is my duty, and Samuel Slick always does his duty."

"Your duty! And why is it your duty, Mr. Samuel Slick?" scorn in demeanor and tone.

"I am an officer of the law, my dear girl."

"I doubt it; but, even if you are, what right have you to interfere with me?"

"I have orders to arrest you, Miss Howland."

"For what?"

"Ah—eh—ahem! For murder!"

"Of whom?"

"Your husband."

"Bah! A trumped-up charge as you very well know."

"If you can prove that, you have nothing to fear, Miss Howland."

"I fear the wretch who has brought the charge against me and hired such tools as you and your companions to do his dirty work."

Samuel Slick's face flushed, but an evil light filled his sinister eyes.

"You have a sharp tongue," he declared.

"An' begorra! she knows how t' use ut," nodded the Irishman, stretching his huge mouth in a still broader grin. "It's a n'ate little pace av caliker she is, ur me name's not Molasses Pat, th' Bad B'y from Kiltrush."

"Thar, thar!" growled the big cowboy. "Jest take a double hitch on yer jaw, Irish, an' let ther boss do ther talkin'."

"I do not wish to harm you, Miss Howland," asserted Slick, again passing his skinny hands over each other nervously; "but you will have to surrender yourself into my charge."

A defiant laugh came from the desperate girl's lips.

"I will have to, eh? Well, we shall see about that. I have run from you and your tools as long as I can, and now that you have me cornered, I shall fight!"

"And are you foolish enough to think you can hold out against us? These men were chosen to aid me because of their records. This fellow on my right is Hustler Hank, who in many a scrimmage has shown himself fully a match for four or five common men. The other is known as Molasses Pat, because of his sweet smile, but he has the additional title of the Bad Boy from Kiltrush. These men are here to do exactly as I command them, and if I spoke the word, they would have you off that horse in less than half a minute."

"And you, an officer of the law, choose such wretches to aid you in arresting one unprotected female! Brave, brave fellows! But, let me tell you this. With your Hustler Hanks and Molasses Pats, you cannot arrest me! I will put a bullet through the head of the first one who makes a move in this direction, and if you do not believe I know how to do that little job, just go on with your game!"

"Be jabbers, she m'anes it!" grinned Pat.

Slick looked disgusted.

"Why will you be so foolish?" he cried.

"If you give yourself up quietly, there will be no harm done. You say you are innocent of the charge against you, and if you are, you have nothing to fear. Your best course is to surrender."

"Ah, your words sound very well, but I can read your treacherous heart! Have I not just

escaped from the clutches of some unknown foe? You were sent to recapture me, and if I surrender to you, I should be carried back to captivity. I do not yet understand the foul game against me, but I have felt the force of my enemy's power, and I do not mean that he shall again get me in his grasp."

There was a boldness and determination about the girl's words and manner that filled the three men with admiration, rascals though they were. It was plain she meant every word she uttered, and they felt sure she would not hesitate to shoot if they crowded her. But, she could not always hold them covered; her arm would grow tired in time and the revolver would fall.

Barbara Howland had thought of that, and her mind was busy trying to devise some means of escape. She was in no hurry, for her horse sorely needed a breathing-spell, as it had almost given out ere she was brought to a halt by coming face to face with the men whom she supposed to be behind her. Still there were only three of them, and—

"Where is the fourth one of your party?" she sharply demanded. "There were four of you at first, what has become of the other?"

"His horse gave out and he was forced to fall out of the chase," explained the self-styled officer of the law. "But we three are quite enough to accomplish the purpose for which we started out."

There was an insincerity about his explanation that gave her a feeling of uneasiness. She longed to look behind her yet dared not do so, for she knew the three whom she held at bay would improve the opportunity to dash upon her. Had she looked back, she would have detected a cautiously creeping figure that was advancing inch by inch with the stealth of a cat approaching its intended prey. Slowly and surely the net was closing on the unfortunate victim.

"Stand aside and let me pass!"

She flung the sharp command over the leveled revolvers, and it was greeted with sneers.

"Dern my skin ef she w'dn't go right off all erlone!" exclaimed Hustler Hank, in derision.

"An' she'd surely be afther getthing lost all be hersilf, Oi balive," chuckled Pat, nudging himself in the ribs with his thumb. "It niver w'd do at all, at all."

"You cannot pass, Miss Howland," declared Samuel Slick.

"Why do you persist in calling me Miss Howland, when you say the charge against me is husband-murder? If that is true, surely I should be Mrs.—what?"

"The marriage was a secret one, and you continued to be known by the name of Howland—your maiden name. I have addressed you thus out of consideration for your feelings."

"Indeed! How very kind of you!"

"But you do not deny the marriage—you cannot deny it!"

"I deny nothing here, and I refuse to parley longer with you! If you do not move aside and let me pass, I shall be compelled to remove you!"

She set her teeth firmly and an added fire leaped from her flashing eyes. Pat crouched a trifle in the saddle, as if expecting a fusillade of lead from the revolver which menaced them, muttering:

"The S'int's defin' us!"

Slick pretended to keep his eyes on the girl's face, but, in truth, he was watching the advancing figure behind her. He cried:

"Hold a moment, girl! Do not be rash! Perhaps we can arrange a compromise."

"We can arrange nothing of the kind. I will accept no terms you can offer, except the privilege of going my own way unmolested. Remember I am desperate."

"But you must listen to reason!"

"I will listen to nothing. I am going on to Jericho City, and no obstacle shall stop me. Clear the road!"

"I'll be derned ef she don't mean business!" muttered the Hustler. "She's jest er leetle jam-daisy, or I don't know Texan long-borns from Mexican sheep! Ther galoot thet ropes her fer keeps draws the capital prize."

There was a moment of dead silence; then the self-styled officer again urged the girl to listen to reason. He was simply talking to gain time. The creeping figure was close upon the intended victim, and, in a few seconds more would be ready to spring. Already had the net closed too tightly for Barbara Howland to escape unaided.

"I have given you fair warning," she cried.

"Now I will count five. If you have not moved aside by the time I have uttered the final number, I shall clear my road with bullets! One!"

"Girl, for heaven's sake do not—"

"Two!"

"Howly murther!"

"Three!"

Nearer and nearer crept the crouching figure.

"Your last chance, men. I am in deadly earnest. Four!"

The figure behind her bounded forward and seized the desperate girl's arm, dragging her from the horse, the revolver being discharged in the struggle. She uttered a cry of bitter despair that was echoed by shouts of triumph from Samuel Slick and his companions, as they

rushed forward to secure their prize, now in the grasp of the fourth ruffian—Pious Dick.

But at this juncture a clear voice rung out sharply:

"Hold on ther! What's all this row about, anyway?"

CHAPTER II.

AN UNWELCOME RESCUER.

WITH exclamations and oaths of dismay, the four men looked up, attracted by the voice. They saw a tall, dark-complexioned man who had suddenly appeared from behind a mass of fallen boulders less than four rods away. And in either hand the stranger held a cocked revolver.

"If there is any fun or excitement going on I want a hand," he said. "What are you trying to do with that young lady?"

"Help, help, sir!" shrieked Barbara, struggling desperately to tear herself from the clutches of the villain who had dragged her from her horse. "These men are ruffians of the worst type!"

"I do not need to be told that," assured the new-comer. "A glance at their faces would reveal that fact. Unband that lady, you dog, or I drop you in your tracks!"

But, instead of obeying the command, Pious Dick swung Barbara's form round in front of him so he was shielded from the stranger's bullet by the girl.

"Oh, no I don't!" chuckled the wizened rascal. "Praise the Good Lawd! I know my gait! Ef you git this gal, you'll hev ter take her, blessed ef ye won't!"

"You miserable coward!" grated the tall champion. "So you hide your detestable carcass behind a lady's petticoats, do you? I'll get a crack at you yet."

"I pray ther Lawd thet ye don't!" was ruffian Dick's response. "I am not quite ready to pass over Jordan."

Samuel Slick advanced a pace toward the man with the revolvers, bowing and rubbing his hands, one over the other.

"My dear sir," he began, in his most suave manner, "I trust you will not interfere with the law."

The stranger laughed shortly.

"That is because you do not know me," was his retort. "I am a man who cares not a hurrah for the law you represent."

Slick looked somewhat discomfited, but he persisted:

"I am simply doing my duty, sir. This young lady is a criminal whom I am obliged to arrest."

"And to arrest her you found it necessary to employ the services of three of the worst reprobates in the Gunnison country. Does it take four such bold fellows to arrest one friendless girl? Well, well!"

"But, you do not understand the situation, sir. She is a desperate creature—a murderess."

"Help!" cried Barbara once more. "Do not believe what he tells you, sir. It is a false and absurd charge, brought against me by a cowardly but unknown enemy."

"Oh, I would not believe the man under oath," returned the stranger. "His face is a perfect chart of deceit."

The girl continued to struggle desperately, hoping to break clear from the wily wretch who had effected her capture.

"I solemnly believe I'll hev ter choke ye ef ye don't keep still," sputtered Pious Dick. "Ther Lawd knows I'd hate ter be so rude, but then business is business, an' it's my business ter keep you whar you'll shield me from ther gun of thet thar impolite critter wha's dared ter stick his nose inter this leetle game. May heaven bless ther galoot ef I w'dn't like ter putt ther length of my knife atween his ribs!"

"You cur!" panted the unfortunate girl.

"You cowardly whelp! to spring upon me in such a manner and then threaten to choke me! If I were a man, I'd shake the miserable soul out of your body—I would!"

"But, you see you are not a man, my darling. What a little spitfire you are! By gracious! I admire your spunk after bein' kept shut up so long an' havin' sech a hard run arter ye got free. Heaven knows you'd 'a' bin a man ef 'tadn't bin fer spillin' er mighty harnsum gal."

Once more Barbara appealed to the stranger for aid.

"Keep cool," he advised. "I shall not allow these men to harm you. If that fellow who is holding you dares to hurt you, he shall answer for it with his life. I hold the drop, and these fellows will have to come to my terms or chew lead."

Sam Slick looked alarmed, while Molasses Pat grinned in a fiendish manner. Hustler Hank was viciously impatient.

"Derned ef he hain't got ther gall!" he snarled. "Seems like you think you're runnin' this yere part o' ther kentry, stranger."

"Beggorra! thit's a fact," agreed the Irishman.

The self-styled officer continued to wash his hands in invisible water, while he canted his head on one side and said:

"It cannot be, sir, that you will defy the majesty of the law? Why, such a course would be unprecedented!"

"Then I will establish a precedent," nodded

the man with the revolvers. "That young lady has asked me to protect her from you and your ruffianly crew, and I never turn a deaf ear to the cry of the weak."

"But she is in our power, sir, and we are four to one."

"Excuse me. Four to two, for the young lady will give one of you all he can do to look after her. I can wipe out the other three in less than three seconds."

"Oh believe he'd do it," and Pat's grin assumed a sickly aspect. "It's the devil Oh say in the eye av him!"

"Or, shut up, you derved coward!" growled Hustler. "We kin do him. He can't keep his eye on ther hull o' us."

"But I have my eye on you, my fine friend," asserted the girl's unknown champion; "and I shall take care to lay you cold at the start. If you hope to ever again rope a long-horn or bear a hand at a round-up, you will do your level best to settle this little affair speedily at my terms."

"He has nothing at all to do with it," Slick hastened to say. "These men are simply in my employ and will do as I say."

"Then you are the individual at whom I shall direct my remarks, and if you do not come to your senses right speedily, I will ventilate your system to give a chance for a little horse-sense to creep into you."

"What do you ask?" falteringly.

"The unconditional release of that girl."

"But I have been paid to capture her and turn her over to my employer."

"I care nothing about your dirty contracts. I demand her release at once."

"And refusal—"

"Means death to you, a ball through your brain!"

Slick's hands shook a trifle as he rubbed them over each other.

"You shall pay dearly for this," he began, in a pitiable attempt at bluster.

"Save your threats for those who care for them," came sharply from the dauntless stranger. "You have listened to my demand; now I will listen to your answer."

In despair Slick turned to his companions. Did a signal pass between them? It was impossible for the man with the revolvers to say, but he watched every move with his keen and restless dark blue eyes, on the alert for any sudden move. The self-styled officer turned back as if a sudden thought had struck him.

"There is big money in this," he declared, in a hoarse whisper that seemed meant for the stranger. "What will you take to—"

"Stop!" burst from the tall man's lips. I understand you, you miserable sneak thief! So it is money you are working for! So it is money that has induced you to hunt down an unfortunate and innocent girl! For money you have turned against a friendless woman, and with your wolfish companions have run her to earth! Gods! I am tempted to shoot you in your tracks, as you deserve, and leave you as a feast for your kin, the mountain wolves!"

Slick's face almost seemed to turn green, as he cowered before the fierce denunciation and he put up his hands as if to ward off a torrent of blows.

Incensed beyond control and with sudden recklessness, Hank snatched at a convenient revolver, but did not succeed in drawing it from the holster, for quick as thought, the stranger covered the cowboy and pulled the trigger. As the weapon spoke, Hank uttered a cry of anguish, threw up his arms to clutch wildly at the air, then fell heavily on his face!

There was a moment of silence, as the stricken man's companions remained motionless and horror-stricken, then the voice of the man with the revolver was heard:

"I am through fooling. You have all heard of me. I am Desperate Durg!"

"Murder an' blazes!" howled Molasses Pat. "The devil hiss!"

Then the Irishman flung himself on the back of one of the horses, and lashing the animal into a mad gallop, went tearing down the rocky pass. And his companions were not slow to follow his example. All had heard of Desperate Durg, and lost no time in getting out of that immediate vicinity. Both Sam Slick and Pious Dick leaped upon the two remaining horses and went skurrying away after the demoralized Pat.

In an instant the man who had caused the rout thrust his revolvers out of sight and hastened to Barbara Howland's side. The girl had fallen to the ground in a half-fainting condition, and he bent over her, exclaiming:

"Barbara, Barbara, look up, Barbara! Don't you know me?"

She started and looked into his face, then she leaped to her feet with a shriek and stood glaring at him.

"Heavenly Father! it is Helos Boderick!"

He sprang to her side and caught her hand, speaking rapidly, passionately:

"Yes, it is I. I knew you at first, but I saw you did not recognize me. I have found you at last, thank God!"

She tore her hand from his grasp, her eyes filled with a light of aversion not unmingled with horror.

"Call back those ruffians!" she cried. "I choose their company before yours!"

CHAPTER III.

A MAN'S LOVE AND A WOMAN'S FRIENDSHIP.

DESPERATE DURG staggered back a step as if she had struck him fair in the face with her clinched hand, and for several seconds the two thus strangely met stared into each other's eyes. Then he cried:

"You cannot mean it, Barbara!—my God! you cannot mean it!"

"But I do mean it! I know you of old, Helos Boderick! I know the full depth of your treacherous nature!"

"Barbara are you mad?"

"No, I was never more sane; but I cannot forget the past. Did you think I had forgotten it?"

"I prayed God you had."

"And I prayed God I might never look upon your face again; but he has seen fit to bring us together. For what purpose I cannot tell."

"He has brought us together that I might explain. If you will listen—"

"No, no, no! Why should I? Once you tried to explain, but—"

"You would not listen then. Had you, you might not think so harshly of me now."

"You cannot deceive me with your false tongue."

"I have no desire to deceive you; but, fate has thrown us together again, and now you must listen to what I have to say!"

"Must listen?"

"Yes. In reason you cannot refuse. Surely I have a right to clear myself in your eyes."

"Clear yourself! You cannot!"

"But I can explain my acts. They may not look so very black when you know the truth."

A look of desperation came into the girl's eyes.

"I am in your power!" she cried. "When I faced those human wolves a short time ago I was armed with a weapon I know how to use. Now I am unarmed and at your mercy."

"As God hears me, I would not harm you for the world!" he declared. "You are too dear to me—"

"Hold! Dare you speak thus to me now? You asked to make an explanation of past acts of treachery to the memory of your dead friend, and barely has the request passed your lips when you repeat the offense."

He smote his hands together with a wild gesture.

"It is my heart!" he cried—"my hot heart! Two years have passed since then. Surely it is not treachery to the dead to tell you how I love you now?"

"If you had never spoken before, I might agree. But barely had he left my side—gone I knew not whither—when you tried to blacken his character in my eyes. You told me he was false and had betrayed me. The marriage, you said, was a mock ceremony and he had deserted me within the hour after its performance. I would not—I could not believe you! He was too true—too noble!"

"And yet I solemnly swear it was true. He was—"

"I will not listen!" came in almost a shriek from her lips. "If you repeat those accusations now, you will drive me to madness! I have despised you for trying to force me to love you in the past; I shall doubly despise you if you repeat those things."

"Why should you despise a man for offering you his love?"

"Such love. You swore he was false—had deserted me—then you begged me to fly with you! It makes my blood boil to think of it! I was married to another."

"A mock ceremony—you were not legally his wife."

"But what should I have been to you? I spurned such love as you offered, as I would have spurned it had I not known of your treachery to the man who once called you friend."

"I offered you marriage—"

"After you had made me hate you by your cowardly proposals."

"I told you I would hunt down the man who had so basely deceived you and kill him. I would bring you proof of his death; then, you would surely be free to become my wife."

"What is the use of recalling all this? I know it only too well! Every act—every word is seared into my brain. I was a young and thoughtless girl, and it is a wonder I did not listen to your seductive words. Only my great love for one man, and my faith in him for all of your tales of his treachery, saved me. He is dead now, and I thank God for that faith in him!"

"But you do not know everything. Listen: He and I were friends—firm friends. We both fell in love with you at about the same time. Do not start; it is true. I knew of his love, but he knew nothing of mine. There was a feud between his family and yours, and it seemed an impassable barrier separated you, for your parents would never consent for you to marry a Gordan. That knowledge made him determined to possess you by foul means if not by fair. He

told me everything—how he loved you and meant to win your love if possible. His words cut my heart like a knife, but my lips were sealed. I determined you should choose between us. If you chose me, I would go to him and frankly tell him the truth; if you chose him, no one should ever know of my passion for you, and I would aid him in winning you."

"But at that time you met him by accident. He did you a service. Saved you from a furious dog, and you felt you owed your life to him. You instantly fell in love with him, and nearly cried your glorious eyes out because he was a Gordan. Then followed secret meetings, and I found you were lost to me because you loved him. I will not attempt to describe the anguish this knowledge gave me, but I concealed my pain and tried to crush out the love in my own heart. I decided to help him to win you, but had I known his wicked intentions, I would have gone to your parents and warned them. I knew nothing, and he accomplished his nefarious scheme with my assistance."

"You know how much he and I resembled each other in those days. People were sometimes bothered to tell us apart, especially at a little distance. Our voices were alike, and we were of the same complexion. To-day you did not know me because of the change. My eyes are still blue, but exposure to all kinds of weather has tanned my skin. My hair and mustache I keep colored. I have good reasons for doing so."

"Well, one day Gordan astounded me by a proposal. Just what it was I will not fully explain, but it was that, through our resemblance, your parents should be deceived. Your father was friendly toward me, and Gordan proposed that he be deceived into believing it was I with whom you were in love. Wearing my clothes, he could pass as Helos Boderick. I would not listen; I would take no hand in such infamous deceit. At first he was angry, but at length he laughed it off as a joke. But I could not forget a few words he had uttered—words I have not seen fit to repeat to you. However, I resolved not to interfere between you as long as his intentions were honorable. I could not read his heart."

"I went away, for I could not bear to remain, and witness his happiness. Every time I saw you it nearly drove me wild. I feared I should betray myself and ruin everything if I remained. But I overestimated my will-power. I could not remain away. I hastened back, only to learn there had been a secret marriage and my friend, the groom, had disappeared within an hour after it was performed. It matters not how I learned the truth; I did learn that the marriage was no marriage at all. He had deceived and deserted you. Then all my old love for you returned, and my friendship for him turned to hatred in an instant. I hastened to your side, but I had no thought of telling you the truth. In the talk that followed it was wrung from my lips. I know how my words crushed you, and when I saw you lying like a broken lily before me, my great love overcame my judgment. I caught you in my arms and kissed you again and again, while I whispered all my passion. I can never forget what followed. You spurned me!"

The girl had sunk on a bowlder and was listening with bowed head. She did not lift her eyes as he uttered the final words in a tone of bitter anguish, half-turning from her. For the time she almost appeared turned to stone.

"Barbara, Barbara!" he cried, chokingly.

"I would have given the world for one word of hope from your lips at that moment. I did not ask that you give yourself to me then. I offered to hunt down the man who had wronged you. But, you did not believe me—you could not think him false. You even said that if the ceremony was a sham and he had deserted you, he had not done you the greatest wrong possible, for in the short time he was with you he had made no claims of a husband's rights. The influence of the man was still upon you. You could forgive him for deceiving you; but you could not forgive me for loving you. Were you just?"

He extended his hands to her in supplication, but she did not look up or speak. He bent forward and continued:

"I did not wait for your consent, but I went out into the wide world to hunt the man down. I had resolved to kill him for the wrong he had done you. For six months I traced him here and there, and at last I found him—dead! He had quarreled with a gambler on a Mississippi boat and a knife had ended his existence. Then he was cast into the river. The body was so decomposed it was impossible to recognize it, but I know his clothing bore his initials and I found the trinkets upon him that I carried back to you. He sleeps in an unmarked grave in Louisiana, and God knows I have tried to crush from my heart the great hatred I once felt toward him!"

"That is the story. Some of it you have never heard before. You did not know how I loved you before you were anything to him; you did not know how I tried to put that love from my heart when I discovered you loved him; you did not know the anguish it caused me. Now you know everything. If I acted imprudently in the past, my great love for you must be my

excuse. I am not like other men. My heart rules my head and often leads me to—ashness I regret. Barbara, I beg your indulgence of my faults! If I have been wrong, I ask your forgiveness, for I am sincerely penitent. Barbara—"

He held out his hand to her, entreatingly. The girl stirred uneasily and then looked up. Their eyes met, and his glance was full of humiliation and entreaty. Slowly she arose to her feet.

"Perhaps I have been somewhat in the wrong," she confessed, falteringly. "You are a man, and I could scarcely expect you to judge him lightly. You were wrong in the past and made me despise you, but if you are truly repentant—"

"I am!" he cried, eagerly—"I am!"

"I will try to forget the past, but you must keep a check upon yourself. Let us not speak more of him, for it can do no good. If he is dead, my heart is buried in the grave with him."

He bowed, and she added:

"You have changed in the two years since I saw you last, but I have changed also. I am older and know more of the world. I have accepted your explanation of things which looked black against you. Now what do you ask?"

"Your friendship," holding out his open hand to her.

She bowed and placed her gloved fingers within his grasp.

CHAPTER IV.

AMBUSHED.

A JOYOUS light flashed in Desperate Durg's blue eyes as he warmly pressed Barbara Howland's hand, and he exclaimed:

"This is my happiest moment for years! Since I knew you were lost to me, my existence has been a miserable one indeed."

A shadow fell upon her face.

"Remember," she said, soberly, "I make you no pledge save that of friendship so long as you deserve that much from me."

He bowed.

"I accept the situation. Your friendship is more to be prized than any other woman's love."

Something almost like a smile touched her lips.

"You have not forgotten the art of flattery, I see; but you must remember I am not the light-headed and thoughtless girl of two years ago. The flattery that might have been acceptable then would be little short of offensive now."

"I am not a flatterer," he protested; "but I cannot always govern my tongue. At times it will speak the truth, even if it gets me into trouble."

"You are unfortunate."

"Perhaps."

He had clung to her hand, but she now resolutely drew it away.

"But how came you here, Barbara?" he asked.

"When I saw you last you were in Kentucky."

"Many things have happened since then," was her sad reply. "My parents are both dead."

"Heavens! Poor Rufus Howland and good Mother Martha both gone?"

She bowed, her lips quivering a little.

"I am alone in the world now."

"With no protector?"

"I am usually able to take care of myself," she declared, with a touch of pride.

"Still you have been in trouble."

"Quite true."

"And but for my opportune appearance, would be in trouble now."

"I acknowledge the debt, and I thank you for what you did. If I said aught to wound your feelings, I humbly beg your pardon."

"Do not mention it!" he cried. "It is forgotten."

"Had you not appeared as you did, I would have become once more a captive in the power of my enemy."

"Your enemy?"

"Yes; I have a cowardly but powerful foe."

"Who can it be?"

"That I do not know. The dastard has never shown his face to me. I have seen only his vile tools."

"And I suppose those were some of them who so cowardly took to flight a short time ago?"

"They were. But had we not better go away from here? They may return."

The man laughed.

"There is no danger of that. They did not stop till they were safely out of this vicinity, and they will not return until they feel sure I am gone."

"Have you such a terrible reputation?"

"Well," he confessed, a faint shadow flitting across his face, "I am not called a parson out here in the West. Not that I have ever done anything so very bad, but many times I have been forced to defend my life in some manner. Living thus, I have become a little reckless of my own life. What had I to live for, anyway? I was desperate. For reasons of my own, I gave my name as Durgan instead of Boderick, and it was not long before I became known as Desperate Durg. Then they began to tell lies about me. They painted me a fiend who delighted in taking human life, and wherever I am known I am feared. At first I attempted to trace down

the authors of some of the foul falsehoods, but I did not succeed very well, and I finally discovered it was an advantage in this wild land to have a tough reputation."

"An advantage?"

"Yes. The greatest desperadoes in the West become the officers of the law. They are elected to the most honorable positions the people can give them. They are honored and respected as brave men and heroes. It is not a pleasant-sounding compliment to hear a man say you are the worst cut throat in seven States, but such compliments pave a man's road to earthly glory in this wild section."

"That is truly strange!"

"So I once considered it; but out here the law of Judge Lynch is the law of the land at present, although the time is not far distant when there will be a better state of things. Lynch law has been abandoned in California, and it will be abandoned here. But the revolver and the bowie are important factors in the distribution of justice. In order to look well out for himself, a man must be an expert with both, and must not hesitate about using them at a critical moment. To hesitate means to give the other fellow the drop; and to give him the drop means disaster to you. I never intend to let any one get the drop on me, and I have the name of being remarkably quick on the draw. For these accomplishments I am honored and respected and feared. I have been asked to become city marshal of many a tough camp. The way those fellows skeddaddled when they heard my name was enough to show the advantage of having a tough reputation in this part of the wild and woolly West."

The girl said nothing, but he fancied he detected a look of fear on her face, and he hastened to add:

"You must remember I am not half so black as I am painted. To this day I should be hunting down every lie about me had I not listened to the advice of an old '49er. He told me to pay no attention to the stories; they would do me more good than harm. His words have proven true."

"But, this is not a thing of which I wish to speak. It was a great surprise to me to see you here when I supposed you at your old home in Kentucky. How did it come about?"

"I was lured by decoy letters to come to this part of the country."

"By decoy letters?"

"That is what I am now satisfied they were. In those letters it was said my husband still lived and was in these parts."

Desperate Durg uttered an exclamation of amazement.

"He was accurately described," continued Barbara. "It was said he led a sporting life here in the mining-camps. At first I put no confidence in the messages, but finally I dreamed repeatedly that he was indeed alive, and then I was led into the snare. Those letters originated from my secret enemy, and by them I was lured into his clutches. Yesterday I escaped, but was immediately pursued. To-day the pursuit became hot and my trackers overtook—or rather, intercepted me just before you appeared."

"Well, your enemy, whoever he is, has signally failed in making you a captive a second time. I am your friend and bound to protect you. Tell me where you wish to go, and I will escort you thither, if it is to the end of the earth."

"Oh, I am not traveling so far! I wish to go to a place called Jericho City."

"Well, Jericho is not many miles from here. I am stopping there at present myself. My horse is down this way a piece. I see your animal has wandered a short distance away. I will catch him and assist you to mount, then we will turn our faces toward Jericho."

"But the man whom you—sh-shot?"

"Let him remain where he fell. His companions will— Good heavens! he is gone!"

Yes, Hustler Hank was gone! Plainly he had not been so badly wounded, and had crept away while Desperate Durg and Barbara were busy talking.

"Can it be I am losing my nerve?" cried Durg. "When I pulled trigger on the fellow I meant to finish him. He may thank his lucky stars my bullet did not do the work I intended."

He laughed grimly, and Barbara shuddered as he assisted her over the rocks, but she was glad to leave that place. Her tired horse made no attempt to avoid them, and Durg lifted her into the saddle as if she were a feather. Mounted upon his own animal, he was soon at her side, and they started for Jericho.

As they moved along, the man with a dark record chatted in a pleasant manner, and the girl was obliged to confess to herself he had lost none of his fascinating ways. He had the air of a gallant robber knight.

For nearly an hour they rode onward slowly over a very broken country, but Durg assured his fair companion they would soon come to the regular trail between Pick Pocket and Jericho City. They were passing through a rocky defile when Barbara uttered a cry of alarm, having caught a glimpse of a crouching figure behind a mass of bowlders. Desperate Durg's hand fell on the butt of a revolver.

Too late!

A whistling rope came writhing like a serpent through the air, and a noose settled around his body. In a moment he was dragged from the back of his horse. Then, with hoarse shouts of triumph, several masked men sprung from behind the bowlders and hurried toward the victims of the ambush.

CHAPTER V.

ON THE MOUNTAIN TRAIL.

NEAR sunset of the same day on which the events narrated in the preceding chapters took place, two men were riding along the regular stage trail between Pick Pocket and Jericho City. One was a white man, the other a negro, evidently the servant of the former.

The negro's master was a rather round and corpulent individual who had a fleshy double-chin and wore mutton-chop whiskers. His clothes were of brown corduroy and on his head he wore a white helmet hat. His florid face indicated he was a person who indulged in "good eating and drinking," and his entire appearance was that of a highly self-esteeming Englishman.

The negro was attired in a plain suit of rather dirty white clothes, which seemed hardly the thing for horseback travel, and which fitted his angular figure in anything but a graceful manner. His face, although black as midnight, was that of a jolly, good-natured and long-suffering human being.

"Blawst this bloody country!" growled the Englishman, thumping his spurless heels against the horse's sides to urge the animal to a faster pace. "Hi never saw the match hof it. Hi'm glad Hi'm not a hignorant Hamerican to 'ave to hown such a hinferral country for my native land."

"W'y, boss!" laughed the darky, exhibiting two rows of large white teeth. "Wa' de matter wif yo' now? Yo' nebbber keeps de same 'pinion mor'n fifteen minutes. Yo' allus whiffle-whafflin' roun' like a kite in a gale ob win'. 'Twan't only dis mawnin' yo' 'lowed dis kentry wus good 'nuff fo' yo' an' kind ob callated yo'd remain heur de rest ob yo'r natteral life. W'y fo' yo' change yo' mine?"

"Now Hi don't know as that's hany hof your business, you hinferral black rascal! Hi suppose Hi 'ave a right to change my mind if Hi want to? If Hi was fool henough to say Hi hintended remaining in this bloody country, Hi must 'ave been drinking."

"By jinkum! I 'lows dat am a fac', for I dunno de time w'en yo' ain't been takin' jest a little fo' a bracer."

"What?"

"Now fo' de Lawd's sakes, don' git on yo' ear, boss!"

"You hare a himpudent dog! Hi'll discharge you hat the next place we harrive hat!"

"Den, by golly! I reckum I'll git my pay fo' w'at Ise done. Yo's allus freatenin' to discharge me, but w'en it come to settle dat little bill, yo' decides to keep me a little longer. Jes' yo' foke ober w'at yo' owe me, boss, an' Ise reddy to git."

"Ginger!"

"Yes, sar."

"Ereafter you will refrain from calling me boss. That is han hinferral Hamericanism, hand Hi won't 'ave hit! Do you 'ear?"

"Yes, sar."

"Well, see that you take care. Hi ham your master, not your boss."

"Yes, sar."

"Hand hif you do not call me master, Hi'll be jammed hif Hi kick you hout hof those hinferral dirty clothes!"

"I wouldn' mine dat if yo' jes' kicked dis coon inter a suit ob clean ones. I could stan' de kickin' if yo' could stan' de racket fo' de close."

"You shall 'ave a clean suit, sir, hif the person Hi'm looking for is hin this place called Jericho."

"Hand hif yo' don' fine de pusson w'at yo's lookin' fo'?"

"Then Hi believe we will 'ave to turn 'ighway-men. Hi'm getting down to that hinferral disgusting condition called dead broke; but hif you tell a soul hof hit, Hi'll break your thick 'ead. Do you 'ear?"

"Yes, massa."

"That is like hit! Ginger, you hare a jewel, hand Hi would not part with you for a fortune."

"Dere yo' goes ag'in! Changed yo' mine in less dan no time a-tall. By gollum! if dat mine ob yo'n wur a fortune, yo'd be a pore man befo' free minutes."

"Ow's that?"

"Yo'd lose it so quick."

The fleshy Englishman glared at Ginger in disgust.

"Do you call *that* a joke?" he demanded.

"It wur a drefful hard gasp fo' one."

"Well, hit's a bloody wonder hit was not your last gasp. Hanybody helse would 'ave dropped dead hafter getting hof such a chestnut."

Ginger laughed and said:

"I wan' to ax yo' a question, sar."

"Well?"

"If we should be stopped by robbers whar would yo' do, sar?"

"Do! Why, Hi'd draw my pistol hand shoot them down like so many dogs! Hi ham not a man

to be 'eld hup by 'ighwaymen. Hi ham Lord Alfred Dumly hof Hengland, hand there never was a coward who bore the name hof Dumly. What do Hi care for common Hamerican 'ighwaymen! Hi'd like to see twenty 'ighwaymen happeer hat this minute. Hi'd show—"

"Halt therel. Hands up and empty, or we will fill you full of cold lead!"

Sharp and crisp came the command, followed by the appearance of six masked men who blocked the trail and covered the boastful Englishman and his colored valet with cocked revolvers.

"Hi'll be jammed!"

Lord Alfred Dumly's florid face lost much of its color and he actually looked alarmed.

"De bressed Lawd!" gasped Ginger.

"Hands up!" repeated the leader of the masks.

"We mean business, and we never repeat the order the third time. Bullets come next."

"Up dey goes!" and the darky suited the words by promptly lifting his hands above his head.

Lord Alfred was not slow about following his valet's example, but he spluttered:

"This is han houteage—han hinfarnal houteage!"

"Fo' de Lawd's sakes, massa, w'y fo' don' yo' draw yo' pistol an' shoot dem down lek so menny dawgs?" whispered the negro, in a hoarse tone that plainly reached the ears of the masked men.

"'Anged hif Hi do not believe Hi 'ave forgotten to load the blawsted pistol," confessed the Englishman. "Hi 'ardly think Hi would 'ave time to load hit now."

"You can try it, if you think it healthy," laughed the leader of the masked men. "But I will bet you the world against a marble you will not get a hand below your hat brim before the boys will load your fat carcass with lead."

At this Lord Alfred fairly choked with rage.

"You shall pay dearly for that hinsult!" he gurgled, nodding his head till it seemed there was danger he would dislocate his fat neck. "Hi wish you to hunderstand Hi ham an Henglishman—a subject hof the Queen. Look hat me! Do you know who Hi ham?"

"I do not believe I ever met you before," acknowledged the mask.

"Well, Hi ham Lord Alfred Dumly hof Cheltenham, Hengland, Hi would 'ave you hunderstand. Hit will be a serious hofense hif you hinterfere with me, for the Crown will 'old you responsible."

"We do not care a boot in Halifax for the Crown," contemptuously retorted the spokesman of the masks.

"Hif hit is my money you want, Hi would hinform you Hi do not carry hit with me. Hit is hall safely hin bank."

"De good Lawd!" snickered Ginger, who did not appear nearly as frightened as his master.

"Then," bowed the masked man, "it will be policy for us to take you captive and hold you till you draw a fat draft and we are able to realize on it."

"And if he fools us, or does not happen to have a bank account," said another, "we can get even with him by cutting his fat throat."

The Englishman turned very white and trembled visibly.

But at this juncture another actor appeared upon the scene.

From the rocks behind the masked men arose a tall form, and clearly rung a bugle-like voice:

"Steady there! The man who crooks his neck to look over his shoulder gets a through ticket to Glory! I am Goldglove Gid, the very man you have been laying for, but I happen to have the drop. Every hand I own is full of self-cocking revolvers, and I can do up that entire crowd quicker than a street fakir can say Jack Robinson. A word to the wise is sufficient. Hold your plumb."

A chorus of savage curses came from behind the masks, but not an outlaw dared disobey the command of the man they could not see. One man with the drop held the advantage over six whose hands grasped cocked weapons but whose backs were turned toward him.

Besides that, they had heard of Goldglove Gid. Far and wide he was known as a dead shot and a Man of Grit.

He was a handsome fellow. His features were clean-cut and manly, and his eyes blue and frank. A yellow mustache shaded his lips and his hair was a mass of yellow curls. Upon his head he wore a wide-brimmed dove-colored hat encircled by a gold cord. His coat was of black corduroy. He wore no vest. The shirt beneath the coat was of white woollen material with a wide rolling collar, a dark sailor's tie being knotted in front. His pantaloons were of grayish material and were thrust into the tops of a fine pair of long-legged boots. Upon his shapely hands were the fine-fitting gold-colored gloves which gave him his pseudonym of Goldglove Gid.

And he was the very man those six masked desperadoes had been lying in ambush for upon the mountain trail. They had made a terrible blunder in interfering with Lord Dumly and his valet at all, and now Goldglove Gid had them at an advantage.

"Such things will happen in this world,"

laughed the Man of Grit, as he listened to the rufians' curses of dismay. "The best laid plans of mice and men often fail to work worth a tinker's continental. I happened to tumble to your little trap some time ago, and I have been working for the last hour to get the deadwood on you. Just at present I have it bad. Ha, ha, ha!"

There was something infectious about the laugh and Ginger caught it, breaking into a perfect shout of rollicking darky laughter.

"Fo' de Lawd's sakes, dis is de greatest go I ebber seen!" he shouted, forgetting to keep his hands elevated and smiting them together in his delight. "Speakin' 'bout fun—g'way dar! Dar's fun all ober dis racket. Dis is a case ob de catcher cotched. He, he, he!"

Lord Alfred improved the occasion to reach for his pistol, but Goldglove Gid's voice checked him abruptly:

"Hold a little on there, my corpulent friend! Do not go to fooling with your weapon now, for you may hurt the wrong man. Just you let up and permit me to take charge of this affair. I'll agree to conduct it satisfactorily."

"But Hi 'ave been hinsulted!" spluttered the Englishman. "Hi 'ave been houteaged, hand Hi'll 'ave satisfaction!"

"If you insist on making a fool of yourself, I shall leave you to the mercy of these roadpads with modestly concealed faces. If you are sensible, I will see you out of this box."

Lord Alfred hesitated and growled, but Ginger hastened to say:

"Fo' hebbens sakes don' git cantankerus! Jes' lissen to dat man."

Reluctantly the Englishman gave up the idea of obtaining satisfaction for the "houteage."

"Now," cried Goldglove Gid, sharply, "y'all fellows will drop your revolvers at once. I want no hesitation about it. I shall count three, and the fellow who is gripping a revolver when I say three will get salted right where he lives. That is straight goods. One, two, three. Neatly done! You obey like little men!"

Every one of the masked desperadoes had dropped his revolver at his side!

"Now for the next move," laughed the nervy man of the gold-colored gloves. "You, Sir John B. and your dark-complexioned attendant will ride past those gallant knights of the road and hustle yourselves down the trail toward Jericho about as swiftly as those animals you bestride can get over the ground."

Lord Alfred and Ginger lost no time in obeying these directions, and soon the sound of their horses' feet came clattering from the rocky trail, telling they were quite beyond the clutches of the masked desperadoes.

"Once more," cried Goldglove Gid. "You gentlemen who have so kindly obeyed my suggestions thus far will arrange yourselves shoulder to shoulder. Be lively! That is right. Now, forward march; and the sinner who dares to crook his neck before he gets to that big bowlder down there will stand a good show of getting a through ticket to Eternity. Go on!"

And they went, though one hurled a savage threat over his shoulder. Before they had quite reached the big bowlder the clatter of hoofs told them there was no danger of receiving a shot from the weapon of the man who had outwitted them. As one man they whirled to see Goldglove Gid riding down the trail upon the back of a splendid black horse. To their oaths and shots he turned to wave one gloved hand and send back a clear laugh of triumph.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SINGER IN THE SALOON.

GOLDGLOVE GID was mounted on a fine horse, and it was not long before he overtook Lord Alfred and his valet. The Englishman was blustering at the darky.

"You hare an hinfarnal coward, Ginger!" he stormed, in his gurgling fashion, glaring at the darky as if he would annihilate him. "You know you hare an hinfarnal coward! If Hi 'ad felt you would 'ave stood by me, Hi'd gone hinto them blawsted, bloody 'ighwaymen like an Hamerican cyclone; but the hinstant they said 'ands hup' you shoved yours habove your 'ead hand nearly fell hof your 'orse from fright. Oh, what an hinfarnal coward you hare!"

Ginger grinned, as he replied:

"G'way dar wif yo' foolishness! Dis chile knows his gait. Cayn't catch me wif dat kind ob chaff nohow. I knows all 'bout dat backbone ob yours, massa."

"Ho, you do, do ye? You hare a disrespectful himp hof sin, that's what you hare! What hare you calling me 'massa' for, you blockhead? Hi would 'ave you speak with more respect, sirr."

"W'y, man alibel dat's way yo' tole me ter call yo'."

"Now, you need not tell me that, you himpudent scoundrel! Hi ham a lord, sirr—an Henglish lord! 'Ereafter when you speak to me, you will haddress me as milord. Do you 'ear that?"

The darky raised his hand to his organ of hearing nearest the irascible Englishman and replied:

"Yes, dat's my ear."

Lord Alfred nearly choked and came near

falling off his horse, while Ginger chuckled with inward delight, but kept his face as grave as a deacon's.

"Hi will discharge you!" gasped the furious man. "Hi cannot stand this kind hof a life hany longer. My servants halways 'ad the greatest respect for me."

"Dat mus' hab been w'en yo' wuz 'spectable."

"Wow!" came from milord's fat throat. "You shall settle for this! You shall settle, sirr!"

"By jinkum! Ise reddey to settle any time yo' is. Ise bin waitin' fo' yo' to settle fo' a lawng time."

"This is hardly a fit time to quarrel," laughed Goldglove Gid. "You will have to keep hustling, or those gents who stopped you back there will secure their horses and come down on you before you reach Jericho."

"Oh, we isn't quarrelin', boss!" laughed Ginger. "We's jes' tawkin' to keep our moufes from gittin' out ob order, dat's all."

"What right 'ave you to hinterfere, hany'ow?" gurgled Lord Alfred, trying to transfix the Man of Grit with his eyes. "This haffair is between master hand servant, sirr. Who hare you, hany'ow?"

"I am the chap who helped you out of a mighty tight box a few moments ago."

"Hi deny hit!" shouted the choleric Englishman. "Hi deny hit! We were not in a tight box. Hi am a man who can look out for 'imself, and I do not thank anyone for hinterfiring with my business. Hif you 'ad kept haway, Hi would 'ave soon hopened fire on those bloody 'ighwaymen and put them hall to rout. Hit would 'ave been a satisfaction to me, but you robbed me hof the honly chance for hamusement Hi 'ave 'ad for a month. You bloody Hamericans hare too blawsted fresh!"

A musical and hearty laugh came from Gid.

"So you were about to open fire on the highwaymen, were you?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir, Hi was."

"I fought dat pistol wasn't loaded, milawd," snickered Ginger.

"Shut hup!" yelled Lord Alfred, shaking his fist at the negro. "You will remain silent till Hi give you permission to speak."

"Who said I would?"

"Hi said so!"

"Well, who's Hi? Brest if I know anybuddy by dat name."

"Ho-o-o! Hif Hi honly 'ad a shot-gun Hi'd commit murder! Hi would, so 'elp me Bob!"

"Better use dat pistol."

Milord was so furious by this time that he could only open his mouth and gasp and gurgle. Every attempt to utter a word was a failure and he seemed in danger of having an apoplectic fit. Thinking to soothe him some, Gid said to Ginger, giving the darky the wink at the same time:

"You should treat your master's wishes with more respect."

Lord Alfred instantly regained the use of his voice and turned on the would-be peacemaker.

"Hagain you seek to hinterfere with my haffairs, sir. Hi do not thank you. Hi can manage my hown business. My servant, sir, knows his business much better than you do your hown."

Once more a hearty laugh came from Gid's lips. He was not angered in the least, but was highly amused. Ginger nearly split his head open grinning.

"You appear to be somewhat touchy," observed the wearer of the gold-colored gloves.

"Well, Hi trust Hi 'ave a right to be so. Hi believe you call this a free country, though Hi will say hit's the hinfarnal bloody hignorant country Hi ever traveled in."

"I presume you have traveled extensively?"

"Hi 'ave been hall hower the world, sir. Lord Alfred Dumly's name has been heard in every part of the globe. Hi 'ave been through some thrilling hadventures, Hi assure you, hand Hi 'ave seen some things that would make your 'air turn gray with fright."

"But those terrible sights have not caused you to lose flesh, I should say."

The English boaster scowled a little, for he was touchy about his corpulence, but the implied compliment called forth his good nature—what little he had.

"Oh, Hi ham a man who never hallows hanything to haffect 'im hin the least. Hi 'ave nerves hof hiron."

"Dere's a pile ob brass about yo', too," put in the darky.

"Shut hup! Hif you hare not more respectful, Hi'll show you who Hi ham."

"Wha's dat 'bout high ham? My stomjack's so holler Ise ready ter beliebe ham has riz."

"Ow-wow!" snarled Lord Alfred, furiously thumping the sides of his horse with his heels. "Hi'm bound to be the death of that hinfarnal nigger yet!"

And so the conversation ran until they entered Jericho City, which they reached without further molestation. But by that time Lord Alfred had forgotten his anger and was in the best of spirits. The three proceeded directly to the leading hotel of the place.

Goldglove Gid's fame had preceded him, and

he soon became an object of attention. In Pick Pocket he was well known, and tales of his daring and nerve were in every mouth.

It was past sunset when the three men rode into Jericho, and Gid remained in and about the hotel till the evening was fairly advanced. Then he sallied forth to look around. Almost the first place that attracted his notice was a building in front of which the red light fell upon a sign in huge and inartistic letters as follows:

"METROPOLITAN SALOON AND AUDITORIUM."

The door was wide open, and the sound of a sweet girlish voice singing a plaintive song floated out into the street. The Man of Grit entered.

Already the place was well filled with the strangely varied throng to be seen in a prosperous mining-camp. It was a combined bar-room, gambling saloon and free theater. The bar was not far from the door, and beyond it were the card-tables and faro lay-out. Beyond these was the little stage where an entertainment suitable to the character of the audience was given nightly. The proprietor of the establishment knew how to draw a crowd, and he was coining money swiftly.

When Gid sauntered into the saloon the curtain concealed the stage, for the hour of the entertainment had not arrived. He was surprised at this, and looked around for the sweet singer whose voice had attracted him. He quickly discovered her in the center of a throng of rough men, and a low exclamation of amazement passed his lips, for at a glance he saw she was young—not more than sixteen—and remarkably beautiful. He also saw she was poorly dressed and looked somewhat frightened as her eyes rested appealingly on the faces of the rough men who had gathered around her.

"A white lamb among wolves!" was the thought that flashed through Gid's brain.

Her song had ceased, and the listeners burst into a roar of boisterous applause.

"Give us another, gal!"

"Whoop her up again, honey!"

"She's a canary!"

"Give her room and let her warble!"

A flush mounted to Gid's face as he listened to the rough throng, and involuntarily he muttered aloud:

"It's a shame! Who is she?"

An old humped-backed fellow at his elbow instantly turned and replied:

"You're right, pard; it's er derved shame, but she has ter do it. She's ole Blind Bent's gal."

"And who is Blind Bent?"

"A pore ole cuss w'at had both eyes plugged chock full o' rock in ther White Rock Mine explosion. It put out his light for good an' all."

"And this is his child?"

"His daughter."

"And she finds it necessary to come here and sing in this place?"

"Yep. Has ter do it ur starve."

"Too bad! But, what is her name?"

"Most ever'body calls her Little Buttercup, but I'll 'low ther hain't her right name. I've heern Ole Bent calls her Zee."

"That child has a face and a voice that would make her fortune on the stage. Of course her voice needs cultivation, but its power is wonderful now."

"I dunno northin' 'bout yer cultivation, but I do know she is a lulu now. Sometimes w'en she sings it'll make er feller's eyes water."

"And talent of that kind is running to wreck and ruin."

"Mebbe so. But she's had some good offers from Gilson."

"Who is Gilson?"

"Ther boss o' this yere shebang. He made her a good offer ter sing on ther stage thar, but she refused ter do it. She can knock ther spots offen Daisy Wyldove anyhow; an' Gilson knows it."

"And Daisy Wyldove is—"

"Ther gal thet sings thar every night. She's er howler, but she ain't nowhar with Little Buttercup."

"This girl refuses to sing on the stage, but sings here in the saloon. That is singular."

"This is ther first time she has ever come here er sing. I'll 'low she don't sing on ther stage 'cause her old man don't want her to."

"Well, I don't blame him. But now I have one more question to ask. To whom am I indebted for this information?"

"Ef it's my handle ye're figgerin' arter, I'm generally called Ole Plug Ugly. It's been a mighty long time since I've been called anythin' else, an' I reckon that's good enough."

"Ah! she is going to sing again."

Once more the girl's sweet voice held the listeners spellbound. She sung a pathetic song, the words and air of which carried the thoughts of many a rough fellow back to his boyhood's home and his kind old mother. A great hush fell upon the inmates of the saloon. The girl seemed to throw her very soul into the music.

When it was ended the crowd still remained silent and hushed. Ten, fifteen seconds passed, then a hoarse voice broke the silence, crying:

"By smokel that's wu'th er square hug from ther only an' original Hustler Hank! Whoop!"

The cowboy tough, half-intoxicated, sprang forward and caught Little Buttercup in his arms. The frightened girl uttered a scream of terror and struggled to break from the ruffian's clutch. In a moment two men leaped to her rescue.

They were Desperate Durg and Goldglove Gid.

Durg reached the girl first, and tore her from Hank's grasp, at the same time sending the ruffian reeling to the floor.

"Lie there, you dog!" he cried. "Draw a weapon if you dare! You have seen me before!"

And then, as Desperate Durg and Goldglove Gid stood face to face, the latter exclaimed bitterly:

"I, too, have seen you before, Helos Boderick!"

CHAPTER VII.

LORD ALFRED MAKES A DISCOVERY.

GIDEON GORDAN!

The name fell from Desperate Durg's lips, and Little Buttercup's champion turned pale through the coat of tan upon his face.

The man of the gold-colored gloves bowed, a dangerous light flashing in his blue eyes.

"That is my name!" he declared, proudly. "A name of which I am not ashamed."

With his arm still clasping Little Buttercup's waist, as he had torn her from the drunken cowboy's clutch, Durg threw back his head and glared into the eyes of the man who confronted him, bitterest hatred pictured on his coldly handsome face. Goldglove Gid met his eyes squarely, and the tableau of the four figures—the two bitter foes, the beautiful, terrified girl and the overthrown ruffian at their feet—was worthy of a great painter's highest work.

For at least half a minute they stood thus, uttering no sound; and the witnesses of the striking tableau were dumb and motionless, staring with hushed breath, expecting to witness a tragedy with each succeeding moment.

But there was no tragedy.

With a forced laugh, the man of a black record turned to the girl, at the same time snapping his fingers in a contemptuous manner toward Goldglove Gid.

"This is no place for you, Miss Bent," he said, in a low, earnest tone.

"But—but, I must earn money someway," she faltered, appealingly.

"Surely you need not come here to earn it. I trust I may be able to show you a better and more pleasant way. Come, I will escort you out."

She accepted his proffered arm, and they turned away. Durg did not cast a glance at the man of the gold-colored gloves, who was watching his every move closely. As they started to leave the saloon Gid took a step forward, but he checked himself and shook his head a little, crying:

"I shall see you again, Helos Boderick."

If Desperate Durg heard the words, he made no sign, and with Little Buttercup clinging to his arm, he passed through the open doorway. With his hands on his hips, Gid bit his lips and muttered:

"The snake and the dove!"

He felt a touch upon his arm, and Old Plug Ugly's crooked eyes looked up into his own.

"I reckon ye don't love thet galoot overly much, eh?" asked the hunchback in a guarded tone.

"No, there is no love lost between us," confessed Goldglove.

"I reckoned not. You hev known him afore this?"

"Yes."

"Pritty mean cuss?"

"That is putting it mild."

"Waal," drawled the old fellow, "thet wuz about how I sized him up, an' I don't offen make mistakes. He's one o' ther high cocks o' this yere camp, but he can't wool ther ole man. No, sireel!"

Hustler Hank struggled to his feet and stood glaring at Gid, as if the latter had been the cause of his discomfiture. Finally he shook his fist at the man of the gold-colored gloves, snarling:

"So you jumped at me, did ye? Wal, I've got ye spotted an' I won't fergit."

Gid gave the ruffian a contemptuous look and turned away; but Old Plug Ugly muttered eagerly:

"Best jump him now, pard, an' down him for keeps. He's a mighty bad man an' he's shore ter make trouble fer ye. He tells ther truth when he says he never fergits. Now thet he's hafe-shot ye kin lay him out."

Gid laughed.

"I never quarrel with such creatures when I can avoid it."

"But I tell ye he'll lay fer ye! He'll remember, an' when he sobers off, then he'll go gunnin' fer ye."

"I can handle a gun a bit, myself."

"But ther Hustler's ther wu'st dad-burned cut-throat thet ever stepped inter Jericho. He'll most likely take ye foul."

"That is not an easy thing for any man to do,

if it does sound wonderfully like boasting for me to say so."

"Waal, hev it yer own way, but ef he gits ther drop, ye won't never hev no chance ter say I didn't warn ye. But who be ye, pard—w'at's yer handle?"

"I am usually called Goldglove Gid."

"Good Lawd! Then I reckon ye kin tek care o' yerself. I begs yer parding."

Lord Alfred Dumly came rolling into the saloon, followed by Ginger. The Englishman instantly espied Gid and hastened toward him.

"Why, 'ow hare yer?" was his salutation, as he thrust out his pudgy hand, which the Man of Grit accepted and shook slightly. "Hi'm jammed hif Hi hain't glad to see you! 'Ow do you feel to-night bafter hour litle tussle with the bloody 'ighwaymen?"

"I am feeling very well," smiled Gid. "How is it with you, milord?"

"Hi ham feeling a great deal better since Hi obtained something to heat; but hit is necessary for me to 'ave a smile before Hi get quite straightened out. The hunmanly baction hof my valet while we faced the 'ighwaymen was a terrible shock to my delicate nervous horganization."

"Da's a fac'," admitted Ginger, soberly. "Yo' can see at a squint ob yo' eye dat he is berry delicately hoganized."

Lord Alfred squared himself with his feet very wide apart and glared at the daring dandy.

"Hi' hit wasn't for dirtying my 'ands," he gurgled, savagely, "Hi'd give you an hinfarnal shaking—Hi would, b' Jove!"

"Perhap' de boss yere will len' yo' dem yaller globes ob his."

"Never mind 'im," and the Englishman waved his hand contemptuously toward his servant, as he turned toward Gid again. "E doesn't know what 'e is saying more than 'alf the time. Come hup and 'ave something with Lord Alfred Dumly."

"Thank you, sir," was the reply. "I never drink."

"What?" snapped milord. "Do you refuse to drink with me, sirr?"

"I never drink with any one."

"No difference, no difference! you cannot refuse to drink with an Henglish Lord!"

"Why not?"

"Hi will call you hout, sirr! Hi will 'ave satisfaction for the hinsult! Hit will be your blood or mine! Hi ham a man who brooks no hinsult!"

"That is unfortunate, if you see fit to construe my declination to drink as an insult."

"Hi do, sir! Hi do! You shall 'ear from me! Hi will meet you to-morrow hat sunrise!"

"In the Wild West they never put off duels in that manner. If we must fight, we will meet at once, according to the custom of the country. You probably have a weapon. Stand off there at the other side of the room and I will stand at this. Some of these gentlemen will give the signal. I have an excellent revolver, and I will bet any man five to one I can knock every button off your coat before your body falls."

Lord Alfred turned pale, and stammered:

"Hi ham not baccustomed to such methods. There is some mistake, Hi think. Did you say you never drink? Oh, hexcuse me! Then hof course, Hi cannot hask you to join me. Sorry, 'pon honor! Hi will 'ave to drink halone. Hi will see you later."

And followed by the snickers of the crowd, the "Henglish Lord" walked toward the bar, making a desperate attempt to appear dignified.

The tinkle of a bell sounded through the room, telling the assembly that the free entertainment was about to begin. Again the bell sounded, and with much creaking of pulleys the stage curtain rolled up, revealing an empty stage.

Old Plug Ugly appeared at Goldglove Gid's elbow and whispered:

"It's ther preffessinal, Daisy Wyldove, thet's goin' ter sing. Jest you see if Little Buttercup don't knock ther spots offen her."

Then a girl in short skirts and pink tights appeared and bowed to the gathered throng. At a distance she looked fairly attractive, but it was plain she had brought all the arts of "making up" to her aid.

When the round of applause that greeted her appearance had died out, she struck a pose and opened her mouth to sing. But before she could utter a sound, Lord Alfred Dumly climbed puffingly upon a chair and from that to the top of a deal-table, where he balanced himself with his feet as far apart as possible, and, striking his fat hands together, cried out triumphantly:

"B' Jove, y' know! Hi'll be 'anged hif that ain't my wife!"

CHAPTER VIII.

BARBARA'S OUTLAW FRIEND.

A HOARSE cry of rage broke from Desperate Durg's lips as he was dragged from the back of his horse by the lasso of the masked men who had been concealed behind the rocks. In some manner he succeeded in freeing himself of the stirrups and landed fairly on his feet; but a strong surge on the lasso threw him to the ground, and then the desperado gang hurled themselves upon him and crushed him to the earth.

Some of the masks rushed upon Barbara. One seized her horse by the bridle-rein, while another pulled the dazed girl from the saddle, hissing:

"Take it cool, my pritty, and it will be all the better for you. This is a case of business with us. We do not intend to offer you bodily harm."

But she was not thinking of herself. What had happened to her escort? Had the ruffians killed him? She turned her head to see, not minding the fact that her hands were being bound together behind her back. But suddenly a blindfold was cast over her eyes, shutting out the sight of the struggling, cursing mass of men who were apparently striving to crush the life from the one they had hurled to the ground.

"They will murder him!" she gasped, making an effort to tear the blindfold from her eyes and realizing for the first time that her hands were tied together. "My God! they are murdering him!"

Then she heard heavy blows and a hollow groan, followed by exclamations of triumph.

"That settles his hash for a time!" said a voice.

"Begorra! but it's a mighty barrud b'y ter handle he is!" observed another voice, which the unfortunate girl instantly recognized as belonging to the Irishman called Molasses Pat.

"Hadn't we better finish the job, Cap?" asked a third.

"No; let him slide. His wits were sent wool-gathering by that last blow you gave him, Kirk, and I am not sure you did not crack his skull. Anyway, he will not recover his senses for one hour, at least."

"Thank God! he is not killed!" was the thought that flashed through Barbara's brain.

Then she felt herself lifted and again placed on her horse's back.

"Villains! wretches!" she cried. "Release me!"

A mocking laugh sounded in her ears, and a coarse voice said:

"Don't get excited, little one, for it will not do you the least bit of good. Hold your sweet temper and save your breath. That will be best for you."

She realized her utter helplessness and, with a bitter sob of despair, gave up the struggle for the time, although her spirit was not broken by any means.

She could not see what occurred, but she knew horses were brought forth and her captors mounted them. Then the journey began.

Barbara could never remember much about that journey. She knew not whether it was short or long, over a smooth road or a rough one. Her thoughts were busy with the exciting events of the past few days, and reviewing her whole life history back to the time of her meeting with the handsome lover, who married her only to desert her without a word of explanation, less than an hour after the ceremony was performed. But he was dead, dead! She had entertained bitter thoughts of him, but his death had banished them, as she thought, forever. Now—

She had heard the words of the man whom she once knew as Helos Boderick, but who was now known as Desperate Durg. He had told his story, and in a measure he had made his own actions look less black in her eyes. But once again she found herself thinking bitterly of the man who had fled from her side ere he had been for an hour her husband. She could never hear his explanation from his own lips, but, if he had lived, what explanation could he have made?

If he had lived! The letters which lured her from her home had said he was still alive—alive and leading a wild life in the West. She had dreamed it was true, and she had hastened to find him—for love's magic flame had not entirely died out in her bosom.

But the letters had lied. They were snares to entrap her, and, like a foolish creature, she had fallen into the web. Her enemy had triumphed for a time, at least.

Who was her enemy?

The question was unanswerable. He was unknown to her, but that he was crafty in the extreme was plainly evident. Whoever he was, he knew all about her and her past life. He knew of the secret marriage, a secret she had locked fast in her bosom and guarded day and night. Even the trusted tools of her foe knew the bitter secret of her life.

But what was his object in insnaring her?

That was another question that puzzled her. She had finally decided there could be but one object. Both her father and mother were dead; she was wealthy, for all her father's property had fallen to her. Her only brother had run away from home many, many years before and had died in a foreign country, so she was the only heir. It must be her enemy was working to secure her wealth—to rob her.

By rare good fortune, she had escaped from his clutches once, but could she hope to be thus successful again? She knew the chances were against it, but she would not give up hope. Something might turn up in her favor. She would trust in God and seize the first opportunity.

"Here we are."

The voice of one of her captors broke her

reverie. They had come to a halt, and in a moment she was lifted from the saddle.

"This way, my lady."

"Are you not going to remove this bandage from my eyes?"

"In a moment."

"But I may stumble."

"I will look out for that."

A hand grasped her arm and she was led forward. She did not resist, for she well knew the folly of such feeble efforts.

They entered a building of some sort, and then her escort cried:

"Here, Jack, here is a fair guest for you to look after, and see that you treat her with the greatest consideration. You know the boss has had a special chamber prepared for her."

Barbara started. A special chamber had been prepared for her! Then her recapture must have been anticipated. There was something about it all that she could not quite understand.

The person addressed replied:

"Yes, I know all about it; but when I joined this crowd it was not to make war on women. There is something cowardly about it that I do not like."

"Don't get ratty, Jack," contemptuously sneered the first. "You have pledged yourself to obey the captain's orders, and you know what happens to traitors."

"Look here, Nant, I want none of your insinuations or implied threats. I will tell you now that I am not the boy to stand them. If you fire your mouth at me too much, I will give you good cause to remember me to your last inoment."

"There, there, Jack! Don't get in a huff, old man! I never saw such a confounded touchy fellow! I didn't mean a thing, and you know it. What makes you fly off the handle so easy?"

To this the one addressed as Jack did not reply, but, touching Barbara lightly on the arm, said:

"I trust you will pardon me, but it is my duty to conduct you to the chamber prepared for you."

"But this bandage—my hands?"

"I will remove the bandage and release your hands in a few moments. I would do so now, but my instructions will not permit me. I shall have to take your arm in order to guide you, for which I trust you will not be offended."

The girl was bewildered. What manner of man was this she had come upon in the midst of a band of outlaws—a member of the lawless organization? For her feelings he had all the delicate consideration of a gentleman, and his language indicated that he was not uncultured. She was curious to see his face.

From the building they passed into what she instantly surmised was an underground passage. Her conductor felt her shiver a bit, and he hastened to say:

"The chamber is warmed and lighted. You will no be left in a damp, dark cell, although you will be a captive. The captain has had it arranged very comfortably."

She did not reply, and in a short time she felt the air grow warmer. Then Jack announced:

"Here we are, miss. Now your hands shall be freed and you shall see."

Defly and quickly he removed the bandage and released her hands. But she uttered an exclamation of disappointment as she discovered his face was concealed by a mask. Her exclamation was echoed from him, and he stood staring at her as if he had seen a spirit.

"Heavens!" came from beneath the sable mask.

"That face!"

"Why do you look at me in that way?" she asked, wondering.

For several seconds it seemed the man was unable to reply. At length, he hoarsely demanded:

"Girl, what is your name?"

She was startled by his manner, but she answered:

"Barbara Howland."

He reeled back a step, thrusting out one hand as if to ward her off, while he muttered something in an incoherent manner. She could see his eyes gleaming strangely through the holes in the black mask, and she began to fear the man was going mad. But, with a great effort, he regained his composure in a measure, forcing an unnatural laugh.

"Do not look so frightened," he entreated. "You have no cause to fear me. I am not a madman, if I do act a little strange. I have something to tell you," lowering his voice to a whisper. "I am your friend!"

CHAPTER IX.

OUT OF THE OUTLAWS' CLUTCHES.

A THRILL of mingled hope and fear shot through Barbara's heart.

"My friend?" she repeated, in a hushed tone.

The masked man bent toward her and spoke in a low tone, uttering his words swiftly:

"Yes, I am your friend. Do not look incredulous, for it is the truth. True I am one of this wretched gang of desperadoes, but I have not lost all sense of manhood and decency. I did not join them to become a kidnapper of women."

It almost seemed as if there was something familiar about the man's voice and figure—yes, about his very gestures. The girl began to believe they had met before.

"But your words do not explain your agitation on seeing my face and hearing my name," she said.

He seemed confused.

"Your face is beautiful, and your name is like that of a—a friend of my youth."

She was forced to accept the explanation.

"Tell me quickly," he entreated, "how it is you are a captive in the power of these men. I must leave you in a few moments so no suspicion will be aroused, and for that reason, make haste."

She did not hesitate; she told him everything about her misfortune since leaving her Kentucky home. If the man was deceiving her, whatever she told him could do him little good; but something seemed whispering to her that her newfound friend was sincere.

The man was an eager and nervous listener. He seemed to fear some of his companions would overhear their conversation; but when she had finished her hurried story, he said:

"You have undoubtedly been deceived by the infernal scoundrel who is our chief. He has lured you into this trap for some evil purpose. But, by the powers! I will block his game!"

"What do you mean?" she eagerly demanded, a throbbing hope in her bosom.

"Listen! I am sick of this life; I have been more than half-inclined to leave it for some time. Now I am done with it! I will save you before another day dawns, if you will trust me. Have confidence in me regardless of what I am and you shall never regret it."

His words were earnest and his appearance manly and honest. Still she hesitated an instant. Might it not be getting out of the frying-pan only to fall into the fire? She knew nothing of this fellow who so suddenly professed to be her friend—had not even seen his face. He was an outlaw—possibly his hands were stained with crimes which would fill her soul with horror and loathing. Dared she trust herself in his power?

He saw her hesitation and bent still nearer, his eyes fixed steadily on her own, as he added with an impressiveness that was irresistible:

"I understand your fears, and I do not wonder at them; but by the memory of my dead mother I pledge myself to treat you as a brother would treat a sister. I will guard you from harm with my life. Decide quickly. I must leave you."

She held out her hand.

"I will trust you."

He touched her hand, bowing respectfully.

"You shall be in Jericho City before tomorrow morning. But you must act as natural as possible. Food will be brought you. Eat and drink freely, for it will do you good. There is a couch. Try to get some sleep, but be ready to leave this place at any instant. Keep a brave heart."

He waved her a polite farewell and left the chamber, closing and barring the heavy door behind him. Then, for the first time, she examined her surroundings.

The place was very comfortably arranged for a cavern apartment. There were chairs, a rude cot, a table on which stood a lighted lamp, and a sort of natural fireplace, in which burned a small fire that quite took the damp chill from the place and made it very comfortable. The smoke passed off through a fissure in the rocks.

Barbara began to pace the chamber excitedly, her mind in a whirl. Her adventures seemed almost like a dream, and it was difficult for her to realize she had really passed through such exciting scenes in the short time since leaving her home. She thought of everything—so it seemed—connected with her life, and concluded by flinging herself upon the cot and bursting into a perfect torrent of tears. Thus, in a measure, she found relief from the tension of her over-strung nerves.

But she was not the girl to spend a great deal of time in weeping. She was naturally brave and of a bright and merry temperament, so she finally dried her tears and burst into a musical laugh.

"It is really too wonderful for anything!" she declared to herself. "I used to read of such adventures in stories and think what a delightful thing it would be to pass through them and come out a heroine; but I have quite changed my mind about that point. It isn't delightful at all! It is exactly the reverse. I do not believe I was cut out for a heroine."

But she was!

She deliberately removed her hat and gloves, but kept her outside wrap on, for she meant to heed her outlaw friend's advice and be ready to leave the cave at any moment.

When food and drink were brought, she partook heartily. Then she lay down on the cot and fell fast asleep. She was quite exhausted and slept soundly for hours.

A light touch on her shoulder aroused her. She started up to find her masked friend bending over her.

"Come," he said, quietly. "The road to liberty is open."

She sprang up and swiftly donned her hat and gloves.

"I am ready."

She accepted his arm and they passed along a

dark tunnel till they stepped through an open door into a lighted room. Jack closed the door behind them, and it appeared like a portion of the solid wall of ledge.

Around a table within the room four men were sitting; but their arms were resting on the table and their heads had fallen forward on their arms. They were locked in a slumber from which the report of a cannon would scarcely arouse them. Upon the table were cards, money, two bottles and several glasses.

At sight of the men Barbara started with fear and then moved with the greatest caution, lest she make a noise and arouse them. Her masked friend laughed.

"There is not the least danger of their waking up," he declared. "It would almost take old Gabriel's trumpet to stir them."

"They are not dead?" gasped the girl, in horror.

"Oh, no; simply drugged. But I did the business well."

At the cabin door stood two horses saddled for use. Jack assisted Barbara upon her own animal and then sprang upon the other.

"Now," said he, "keep close behind me and I will lead you straight into Jericho."

The sky was covered with clouds, shutting out the light of the moon and making it unpleasantly dark for a horseman. But it soon became plain Jack knew the road well—or, properly, knew the ground well, for there was no road. He did not hesitate even when they were passing through gorges and ravines where it was utterly impossible to catch a glimpse of the ground beneath his horse's feet. Barbara gave her mount free rein, knowing it would follow the horse of her companion.

And thus they rode for more than two hours.

Finally they came out upon the regular stage-trail, and before long they were in Jericho City. In sight of the hotel Jack drew rein.

"The house is open, I see," he said. "It usually keeps open all night. You will find no trouble in getting lodging there. We may meet again. Farewell."

And, without another word, he wheeled his horse and galloped away, heedless of Barbara's call to him, vanishing in the darkness, a mystery of the night.

CHAPTER X.

MILORD IN TROUBLE.

LORD ALFRED'S declaration created a genuine sensation in the saloon.

Little Daisy Wyldove, the powdered and rouged singer, uttered a shriek instead of the opening note of the song, and looked quite startled.

The proprietor of the saloon grated out a curse and reached for a revolver.

Shouts came from all parts of the building.

Milord seemed a little surprised himself at the commotion his declaration had created, but he stood his ground, flourishing his short arms in the air, regardless of the danger of losing his balance and falling from the table, shouting out some words which were drowned in the general uproar.

In a moment there was a lull, and then, very red in the face and puffing like an overdriven horse, Lord Alfred gurgled:

"Hi tell you that's my wife! Hi know my wife when Hi see 'er! Hi's himpossible to fool an Henglishman."

"Get down!"

"Go choke yerself!"

"Snoot him!"

"Fall off on yer head!"

Half a hundred derisive cries were hurled at the excited Englishman.

"Fo' de Lawd's sake!" gasped Ginger, reaching up and pulling at his master's short coat-tails, "git down offen dar! Yo's shore ter git yeself perfumrated wif a bullet, an' den whar'd all my salary be? Git do'n offen dar, I says!"

But Lord Alfred only flourished his arms still more wildly and shouted himself hoarse.

"Hi did not come to this binfernal place to be hinsulted!" he quirked. "Hi ham an Henglish Lord. Hi would 'ave you hunderstand! That woman is my wife, hand Hi—"

The report of a revolver interrupted him and a bullet whisked close to his ear. His face suddenly lost all its color and he looked weak-kneed.

"Hi'll 'ave the law hon the man that fired that shot!" he declared, shaking a fat fist toward the point where a little puff of smoke was rising above the heads of the crowd. "That is a criminal offense! Hi ham—"

Half-a-dozen revolvers spoke together and as many bullets hurtled past Milord Alfred's ears, some of them passing through his helmet hat and knocking it from his head.

"Fo' hebbens' sake!" groaned Ginger. "Yo's a dead man shore! Git do'n, I says!"

The frightened ducky exerted all his strength in a surge on his master's coat-tails, and in a moment the startled and angry Englishman lost his balance and fell backward, striking fairly on Ginger's head and shoulders and crushing the negro to the floor. As he fell, Lord Alfred gurgled out a despairing cry and waved his short arms wildly in the air, a look of horror and agony on his face. Evidently he believed he had been shot.

When Ginger was struck by the falling body, he gasped:

"Great golly!"

Then he went down beneath the ponderous weight upon him.

Milord was not much hurt; but he was dazed, and he sat up on Ginger's prostrate form, staring around in a helpless manner.

The ducky lay still and groaned dismally.

"What hin bloody blazes is the matter?" growled the fat Englishman, seeming almost stunned. "'Ave Hi been drinking?"

Then he struggled to his feet, shaking his clinched hand above his head and shouting thickly:

"That is my wife, Hi say! She can not escape me hagain! Make way, 'ere!"

He started to rush toward the stage, but the crowd closed round him quickly and hustled him toward the door, despite his efforts. In a few moments he was thrust out of the saloon.

The singer was requested to go on, but it was plain Miss Wyldove's nerves had sustained quite a shock. It was some moments before she could utter a note, and when she did attempt to sing, she broke down in the midst of the very first verse and began to sob.

"Oh, that horrid man!" she exclaimed. "I really cannot sing to-night. You will have to excuse me, gentlemen. I am very, very sorry! That man is to blame for it all!"

Then she retired from the stage, with her handkerchief held carefully to her eyes, and the curtain was lowered. Her tears had seemed quite genuine, but in truth she was blazing with anger.

And the crowd was angry too, for they had been cheated out of an entertainment that cost them nothing, and they considered themselves grievously wronged.

"Whar is ther derved Johnny Bull?" roared a stentorian voice.

Ginger had just recovered his breath enough to slowly arise to his feet, and he was instantly espied.

"Hyer's his nigger!"

"Scalp the black rascal!"

"Punch him!"

Then the mob began to hustle the unfortunate fellow.

"Fo' mercy's sake!" he cried. "I ain't don' nuffin' a-tall. W'a' fo' yo' wants to hurt dis chile, I leks to know?"

Fortunately for Ginger, his master had ventured back into the place and was discovered. In a moment the ducky was left quite alone, while the crowd rushed for Lord Alfred, shouting:

"Lynch him! lynch him!"

The Englishman made a scramble to get out of the door, but he was caught and held fast in the center of the shouting throng. He turned almost as white as a corpse and vainly tried to speak. He realized it would have been better for him had he remained outside the saloon when he was thrust out. After a time, he made himself heard.

"Hare you men, or hare you dogs?" he exclaimed; but at that point he was drowned by a roar from those around him.

"He calls us dogs!" was the cry.

"Hang the infernal Englishman!"

One fellow climbed upon the shoulders of a companion and began to sing at the top of a healthy pair of lungs:

"We'll hang John Bull to a tall hemlock tree."

The crowd caught the spirit of the thing and joined in.

Behind the stage curtain Daisy Wyldove was fervently praying they would hang the man.

Lord Alfred was seized by very rude hands and his clothes were sadly torn. He began to fear his last hour had arrived.

"Bring a rope!" howled one of the mob, and others took up the cry.

But Ginger had not deserted his master in the hour of peril. If Lord Alfred was hanged, the ducky knew he would lose the sum of money the man owed him, so he rushed to his master's aid. How he reached the Englishman's side it would be impossible to say, but he succeeded in crowding his way through the closely packed mob of men.

"Looker hayer!" he cried, his ebony face wearing a desperate look. "W'at yo' peoples fink yo's doin', I'd lek to know? Am dis w'at yo' calls a cibilized country? Dis man ain't done nuffin' w'y fo' yo' should hang him. Jes' gib him hafe a show. Is'pose dere's some decent peoples 'mong yo'?"

Goldglove Gid and Old Plug Ugly had witnessed the entire affair, but they realized it was assuming a serious aspect. The Englishman had been bullied quite enough, and there was no telling how far the thing would be carried if some one did not interfere.

"I am going into that," said Gid, in the old man's ear. "Are you with me?"

"To help the Johnny Bull out—yes."

"All right. I'll make a road; follow at my heels."

Gid's muscular arms and wide shoulders plowed a path through the crowd, and Old Plug Ugly followed him closely. In a few seconds they reached the center of the mob where stood

the scared "Henglish Lord" and his faithful valet.

"Pards," laughed the man of the gold-colored gloves, "this little joke has been carried quite far enough. I think you had better drop it."

A howl came from the crowd.

"Drop nothing!"

"Get out of that!"

"Somebody run that galoot over this way and let me spank him."

Gid smiled, but his eyes flashed dangerously.

"If the individual who said that will come to me, I will agree to give him a spanking that will remind him of his mother," he said. "I would like nothing better than the pleasure of reviving old memories of his childhood in just that manner."

"An' I'll bet two ter one he kin revive 'em!" shouted Old Plug Ugly.

"What business have you to interfere?" demanded one of the mob.

Gid fixed his piercing blue eyes on the speaker, and replied:

"The business of a man who will not see this unlucky man imposed on longer. I make no threats, but I mean just what I say."

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"He's Goldglove Gid, by Moses!" shouted Old Plug Ugly. "An' he's ther best man of his inches thet ever sot hoof in Jericho! Pr'aps some o' you critters hes heerd o' him?"

"Goldglove Gid!"

The name passed from lip to lip. Yes, they had heard of him. Many of them had heard the report that he was in town, and some had seen him at the hotel. A sudden silence fell upon the throng.

Gid laughed, quietly.

"I have not interfered with your sport with our English friend because I desire a quarrel," he said. "But it seems as if you have carried this affair far enough and should be willing to drop it. Now, be honest, pards, don't you think you have?"

And more than one muttered that he thought so.

"Come," and Gid touched Lord Alfred's arm, "you had better get out of here. Follow me."

The Man of Grit moved toward the door, and the crowd parted for him to pass. Lord Alfred followed, with Ginger at his heels and Old Plug Ugly bringing up the rear. In that manner they reached the open air.

"There," said Gid, turning to the man he had befriended a second time, "you are safe, and I would advise you to hustle toward the hotel. It is not a healthy place in that saloon for you."

The Englishman bristled up.

"They hare a confounded set hof ruffians!" he blustered. "Hi will 'ave satisfaction for the hinsults they 'ave 'eaped on the 'ead hof a man hof noble birth—Hi will, sirr! Look 'ow they 'ave torn my clothes! They hare completely ruined! Oh, they shall pay for this!"

"Now, my advice," said the wearer of the gold-colored gloves, "is for you to keep out of that place."

"Who hasked your hadvice, sir! Hi think Hi know my business! Hi would 'ave you to hunderstand Hi ham a man hand not a child to be hadvised!"

Old Plug Ugly gave a snort of disgust.

"You're ther blamedest waggie-jawed fool I ever did seel!" he contemptuously declared.

"You don't know enough ter use a man decent after he has saved your blasted wuthless neck!"

Lord Alfred turned on the old hunchback, fuming like a tiger.

"Hit's a bloody lie!" he gurgled, almost choking in his excitement. "Hi could 'ave taken care hof myself! Hi was habout to go for those ruffians, hand Hi would 'ave licked the whole crowd! Hi am a terrible man when Hi am haroused, hand Hi thank nobody for hinterfering with my business!"

Goldglove Gid laughed as if he actually enjoyed it all, but Old Plug Ugly fairly danced with rage, shaking his knotty fist under the Englishman's nose.

"Oh, you're a terror frum Tough Nut, you are!" he snapped. "Dad blamed if I don't wish we'd left ye fer ther gang ter choke! They'd done it, an' p'r'aps they'd squozed some o' ther foolishness out o' yer fat skin. You don't know enough ter git under cover w'en it rains, thet's my ijee o' you! If you're sech a bad man, jest you pick it up an' I'll agree ter hammer some sense inter your thick head in less'n two shakes. Thet's me, Old Plug Ugly! Do fer heaving's sake git on your ear an' come at me!"

Ginger snickered and hugged himself with delight.

"Jes' yo' wade into him, milawd," he advised. "All yo' needs ter do is fall on him same as yo' did on me. Dat will fix him, fo' it flattened me out fin as a sheet ob paper, an' I habbn't got back to my proppah shape yit."

The English boaster drew himself up with an attempt to be very dignified, but made a ridiculous failure.

"Hi do not bindulge in vulgar rows on the street," he declared. "Hi would not disgrace myself by 'aving a fight with you. Hi would 'ave you hunderstand Hi ham an Henglish Lord hand not a common ruffian."

"An English fool!" sneered the old hunch-

back; "and as big a coward as I ever sot eyes on, amen!"

"Hif you were a man hof my hown rank, you should pay for that with your blood. As hit is, hi take no notice hof hit. Come halong, Ginger."

And Lord Alfred waddled away into the darkness, with his valet snickering at his heels.

CHAPTER XI.

DAISY WYLDGLOVE'S DENIAL.

BEHIND the curtain of the stage Daisy Wyldove fairly fumed with rage as, by the aid of a peep-hole, she saw the corpulent Englishman rescued from his predicament by Goldglove Gid and Old Plug Ugly.

"I did hope they would kill the fat fool!" she gritted, striking her pretty white teeth together viciously and looking very savage for all her paint and powder and tights. "Then he would have been out of my way forever. Oh, how I hate him!"

Jake Gilson, the proprietor of the saloon, made his way behind the scenes.

"Now this is a fine scrape!" he growled, glaring unpleasantly at the unfortunate Daisy. "What is the matter with you, anyhow? Why didn't you sing?"

"Sing?" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing. "How could I sing after the declaration of that drunken fat fool? I never was so insulted in all my life! I saw you draw a gun. Why didn't you put a bullet through his head?"

"Oh, that would not have paid! But what is that man to you, I'd like to know?"

Daisy faced him fairly, her eyes meeting his.

"What is he to me?" she repeated, scornfully.

"Why do you ask me such a question?"

"Because he said you were his wife."

"And I suppose you believed the drunken wretch?"

"He was not drunk. I can tell when a man has been taking too much and I know he was anything but drunk."

"Then he must have been crazy?"

"And you never saw him before?"

"Never in all my life."

Gilson grinned, unpleasantly.

"That won't wash, my girl," he sneered, brutally. "You may as well own the truth."

The actress's eyes almost flashed fire and she literally gnashed her teeth.

"Do you mean to tell me I lie, Jake Gilson?" she hissed, appearing on the point of leaping upon him and tearing at his throat with her nervously working fingers. "Do you dare insinuate I know that man? You had better have a care what you say! I will not stand everything, if I am—as you saw fit to call me the other day—an old stager."

The saloon-keeper laughed, nibbling at the end of a cigar and striking a match, but keeping his eyes on her all the while.

"By George, Daisy!" he finally said, after he had deliberately lighted the cigar; "you are nearer pretty now than I ever saw you before. If you could always act with so much fire, you might be one of the great guns of the tragic drama instead of a common singer and dancer on an 'off' stage in a rather tough mining-camp."

At this the little actress became still more highly incensed.

"So you think I am acting, do you?" she snapped. "Well, I am not! This is not the first time you have insulted me, Jake Gilson; but I think it will be the last!"

"Meaning—"

"That I shall leave you."

"Oh, I guess not!"

"But I will; and I think you will have some fun getting some one to fill my place."

"I hardly believe there will be much trouble about that. I have my eye on a gal."

"Who?"

"Little Buttercup."

"But she can not dance, and she will not appear in tights. More than that, I do not believe you can induce her to sing from this stage at all."

"Money works wonders, Daisy."

"Well, get her if you can! I do not care! All I ask is that you will pay me what you owe me."

She turned as if to leave the stage in a huff, but Gilson laid his hand on her shoulder, saying:

"Hold on a moment. Let's drop this fooling and come down to business."

She faced him with her head thrown back and a passionate light in her eyes.

"Perhaps you have been fooling, but I was never more in earnest in all my life. If you have any business you wish to speak of, say on."

He removed the cigar from his mouth and blew out a curling wreath of smoke.

"You must have sense enough to know I do not mean to fire you," he began; only to be interrupted by:

"Oh, do you really think I have so much sense? And you are not going to fire me! What if I take a notion to fire myself?"

"You will not be so silly. This is a soft snap for you. I pay you well, and you do not have to do half the work you would on the road, or

with some afternoon and evening museum and show. Have I not treated you well?"

Daisy softened a little.

"Oh, you have done fairly by me," she confessed.

"Now there is no reason why you should get on your high horse because I asked you what that Englishman is to you. I own that I was a little riled because his appearance knocked you out so you could not sing; but I had no thought of giving you the bounce. All I wanted was that you should tell me the truth concerning your relations with the man who claimed you for his wife. Here in the camp you pass as an unmarried girl, and for that reason as a source of attraction to this saloon your value is considerable to me. Scores of men in Jericho are all broke up over you and would marry you in a minute if you would have them. The proposals you have had are proof of this. Now you can understand how it will hurt you as an attraction if it goes out you are married. Still I want to know the truth, for if you are hitched to the corpulent individual who laid claim to you, it will be policy to stop his tongue some way. Now, my advice is that you make a clean confession to me, then we can see what can be done about it."

The little actress threw her head back proudly.

"So you think I had better make a clean confession? Well, let me inform you I have no confession to make. As for that fat fool I positively deny ever having laid eyes on him before. He is nothing to me, or I to him."

Gilson frowned and bit his lip, but he finally said:

"Well, that settles it. But if that is the ground you take, you must stick to it through thick and thin. I shall know how to move, for of course the fleshy individual will have no proof of any connection between you. In that case, I can easily close his mouth."

"And I care not how you do it," declared Daisy, as she left the stage for her little dressing-room.

Twenty minutes later the tights and short skirts had been replaced by a more modest attire, and the actress passed from the building by way of a side door. She made her way straight to the hotel.

She entered and ascended the stairs. It was quite dark there, as there was no light on the stairs.

Near the top of the flight she suddenly felt herself clutched, and a triumphant voice gurgled in her ear:

"'Ello, my dear! So hit is you, is hit! Well, Hi ham glad to see you hand feel you once more! Now don't you dare make an infernal row hand raise the 'ouse, for hif you do, hit will be the worse for you!"

She had uttered a slight scream as she felt herself rudely grasped in the dark, but the sound of that gurgling, hated voice quite took away her power of uttering another sound for a time.

"That is right, my dear!" laughed the triumphant man. "Hi see you recognize your master. Give me a kiss for hold times."

"Release me, you wretch!" she gasped—

"release me instantly, or I will scream for help!"

CHAPTER XII.

IN DAISY'S ROOM.

"Ho no, you will not!" was the confident reply. "You know better than to do that, my dear. Hi ham not a man to be trifled with."

"But I do not know you, sir!"

"Now that will not wash! Hit is useless for you to try that game on me. Hi ham not the kind hof a person to stand hit."

"Release me, I say!"

"Hand you may say so till you hare 'oarse, Hi'm jammed hif Hi care! You hare my wife hand Hi 'ave a right to catch 'old hof you."

"Your wife! You miserable wretch. I deny it!"

The little actress fairly choked in her excitement and indignation.

"Hi hexpected you would deny hit, but you know you hare, just the same."

"I know nothing of the kind!"

"Then Hi will 'ave to make you know hit."

"Do you dare threaten me, you—you—you—"

"Hif you hare not careful, my dear, you will strangle, hand that would be a sad thing, indeed! Hi should miss you so!"

"Let me go!"

"Do not be in such a bloody 'urry! Hi 'ave not 'ad that kiss yet."

"And you will not get it! If you do not release me at once, I will call for help!"

"That would be very foolish hof you, my dear. Hi would simply say Hi ham your 'usband, hand then 'ow would you feel?"

"I should deny it."

"But Hi 'ave the proof."

"What proof?"

"The certificate."

There was a little silence, and then Daisy began to sob in earnest, for she was cornered.

"Now what's the use hof hall this fuss?" demanded Lord Alfred. "Hi 'ave you foul hand you may as well take it heavy. Hit will not do you a bit hof good to make a row."

Evidently Daisy had arrived at that conclusion, for she said, between her sobs:

"Come up to my room—Number 13—in five minutes. I will see you."

The Englishman chuckled triumphantly.

"Hall right, my dear."

"Let me go now."

He stooped to kiss her in the darkness, but with a sudden effort, she broke from him and fled up the stairs into the deeper darkness of the passage above.

Lord Alfred descended the stairs, laughing gurglingly with satisfaction; but five minutes later he was lighting matches in the darkness of the passage to ascertain the numbers on the doors. With little trouble he found 13 and rapped softly on the panel. A low voice bade him enter.

The Englishman waddled into the room with a fat smile of satisfaction on his face.

Daisy had lighted a lamp and drawn the curtain to the one small window of the apartment. The room was small but quite comfortable compared with the usual run of rooms in the hastily-constructed slab hotels of new mining-camps. She had paid to have the walls made double thick and boarded quite to the ceiling, so the apartment was much more secluded in its nature than the average hotel room in the camps. There were a few rugs on the floor, and a number of highly colored lithograph posters, on which Daisy Wyldove's name was conspicuous in flaming red letters, adorned the walls.

The little actress closed and fastened the door behind her visitor.

"Well, now Hi swear this is comfortable!" exclaimed Lord Alfred, spreading his legs wide apart and standing with his hands on his hips, viewing his surroundings from the center of the apartment. "This hactually seems cozy hand 'ome-like."

Daisy's eyes were a little red and the color had quite departed from her cheeks; but the pink-colored water standing in the tin basin which served her as a wash-bowl explained the sudden change. Her tears had sadly streaked the charming health-like tint of her cheeks, and in removing traces of the tears she had also removed the tint. Lord Alfred observed the transposition.

"Why, my dear!" he observed; "you 'ave quite lost your color! Hi hexpected you would be blushing like a school-girl hat the thought hof receiving your 'usband."

"Will you sit down?" She motioned toward a chair.

"Ho, yes, hof course! Hi ham ready to make myself comfortable, for you know Hi ham a great fellow for comfort."

He accepted the chair, but the excited little woman began pacing the floor.

"Now, why don't you sit down and take it heavy?" asked milord. "You happeer hagitated."

She turned on him with a despairing gesture.

"Why, for Heaven's sake, did you come here?" she asked.

"To find you, my dear. Nothing else in the world could 'ave brought me to this infernal town."

"I did hope I would never set eyes on your face again!"

"B'Jove, y'know! that is not complimentary hat hall!"

"But it is honest."

"Hif that is 'ow you feel, what did you hever marry me for?"

"You deceived me!"

"Ow?"

"You made me believe you were wealthy."

"Hi was once."

"I do not believe it! You are an impostor!"

"Get hout! you don't mean hit!"

"But I do mean it! You were never an English lord."

"B'Jove, that's blunt!"

"And true. I was a silly fool to be taken in so easily."

"Ow were you taken hin?"

"I thought it would be a grand thing to be called 'My Lady.'"

"Hand you never loved me?"

"Loved you—bah! Never, never, never!"

Lord Alfred sprung to his feet, exclaiming furiously:

"Woman, do you dare tell me that?"

But Daisy did not cower in the least.

"Dare!" she sneered. "Did you think I was afraid of you?"

"You hacted that way, hany'ow."

"Well, I am not. I despise you, but I do not fear you a bit. You are nothing but a fat English bloat!"

Lord Alfred choked and gurgled in such indignation that he came very near strangling on the spot. His convulsions seemed to strike the little actress as quite funny, for she broke into a cold laugh. At this he sprung toward her as swiftly as he could move his ungainly body, hoarsely snarling:

"Hi will not be hinsulted by a woman! Hi ham not the man—"

But she did not retreat an inch. Instead, she shook her hard little fist under his nose, interrupting his angry words with:

"No, I am aware you are not much of a man."

Now don't you think you can frighten me, for I am not built that way! Just you keep your distance, Mr. Bogus Lord Alfred Dumly, if you do not want to run against that!"

"Why, why, you hinfarnal little spitfire!" stammered the astonished Englishman. "Hand you was a sniffling hon the stair hand acting scared bout hof your wital! Hi'm bla'sted hit Hi bunderstand hit!"

"I suppose you were fool enough to think I was afraid of you? Well, you never made a bigger mistake. It was the exposure of the fact that I ever married such a libel on genuine manhood—that was what I feared. I care no more for you and your bluster than I do for an overgrown booby. I know you of old. You do not possess the pluck of a flea!"

"Hi'll be jammed!"

Completely crushed, the man staggered back to the chair and dropped his corpulent body into it, his face as red as a boiled lobster. Seeing her advantage, Daisy followed it up.

"You made a fool of me once, but I have been through the mill and know a little more than I did then. You told about your grand estate in England, your tenants, your servants, and all that bosh, and I swallowed it; but when we were married it was not long before I discovered your ready cash was mighty low. For a time you explained that in a plausible way, while I kept singing and dancing to provide the grub you put into your fat stomach. Just think of the wife of an English lord wearing tights and short skirts and singing and dancing on the variety stage! Isn't it ridiculous!"

"You were always disgusting to me, and that is plain, unvarnished English, or, as they say out here in the West, 'talk with the bark on.' My ideal of a man is tall and graceful and handsome, but Heaven knows you are right the reverse. You always reminded me of a pig. Ha, ha, ha! Be careful or you will have a fit!"

She went off into convulsions of laughter, while Lord Alfred writhed in his chair like a whipped schoolboy. His reception was anything but what he expected.

"You hinfarnal cat!" he gurgled, trying to glare at her in a furious manner, but making a ludicrous failure.

"Cats and pigs never did go well together," said the actress, promptly; "so it is no wonder we did not get along."

"You ran haway."

"Sure. You have *that* right."

"Hi will sue for a divorce!"

"A terrible threat!"

"Well, then Hi won't!"

"Still more terrible. But, milord, what brings you to Jericho?"

"Looking for my wife."

"And I know what you expected to receive when you found her."

"What?"

"Money."

"Well," confessed Lord Alfred, "a little hof the stuff would come 'andy."

"I knew it. Now how much will you take and get out of this town within twenty-four hours, never to return?"

"Five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand dollars! How modest of you! And do you suppose you will get it?"

"You will 'ave to fork hovev liberally."

"I could get into heaven easier than I could raise five thousand dollars. You will have to set your figure lower—and a heap lower, too. I will give you fifty dollars."

The Englishman nearly fell off the chair.

"What in thunder do you take me for—a bloody fool?" he gasped.

"Just about. If you had not been a fool, you would not have climbed on that table in the saloon and yoooped that I was your wife. That upset me for the night and came precious near losing the place for me. You could have waited and seen me after I had done my part."

"Well, Hi will hadmit Hi was a little hexcited; but you see Hi 'ad been 'unting for you so long the sight hof you quite knocked me hup, hand Hi shouted before Hi knew what Hi was doing."

"And made an idiot of yourself, as usual. Now I will be frank with you. If it is known here in Jericho that I am married, I shall lose my place. If I lose my place, you will not get a red cent from me, for then I shall not mind your denunciations. So you see it is policy for you to confess you made a mistake. Just tell them I look like your wife, but you have found I am not."

"Hand what ham Hi to get hout hof hit?"

"I will see what I can do for you. Just now my purse is pretty near empty, but I will see what sum I can raise to pay you to light out of these parts. Those are my terms. Do you accept them?"

"Hit's halmighty 'ard hon a man to 'ave 'is hown wife treat 'im so. Hi hexpected you would use me differently."

"Well, you are doomed to have your expectations stepped on. You have leard all I have to say, and I have no more time to waste with you. I am to sing and dance in the saloon again at twelve o'clock. You must give your decision now at once."

"Then Hi suppose Hi will 'ave to haccept; but Hi need a little cash now."

Daisy opened her purse and took out a ten dollar bill.

"That is all I can spare you for the present, but I will see what I can do. Now fire yourself out of this room, and don't you dare come near it again. When I want you, I will hunt you up. You are to keep away from me."

"Hand you won't heven give me one kiss?"

"No! Get out!"

And the discomfited Englishman took his departure.

Ten minutes after he left the room there was a peculiar knock on the door.

"The very man I want to see!" exclaimed the little actress, softly. "Now we will concoct a plan for effectually and finally disposing of my fat husband. Come in."

The door opened to admit a tall man whose hat was pulled low down over his eyes.

CHAPTER XIII.

LITTLE BUTTERCUP AND HER "DADDY."

"Who came to the door with you, Zoe? I thought I heard voices."

"You did, daddy," was Little Buttercup's frank reply. "A gentleman came home with me."

A look of fear settled on Tom Bent's face, and he turned his sightless eyes appealingly upon his child.

"I—I hope you are not getting to have a beau, little one?" he faltered.

The girl turned rosy red, but a merry laugh came from her lips.

"Oh, no; not just yet!" she asserted.

"But—but—a man came with you—a young man I judged by the sound of his voice."

"Yes—quite young, or not so very old."

"I think, perhaps I—I do not quite understand it. Have you ever had a man come home with you before?"

"Oh, yes; many times."

The blind man gave a great start and turned quite white.

"Why, you never told me of it, child! Who—who was it?"

"You, daddy—your own lovely old self!" and she had both of her round pretty arms around his neck. "You have escorted me home many a time, and it is useless for you to deny it."

The change that came over Tom Bent's face was wonderful to see. He clasped her in his arms, laughing:

"You little minx! You should be ashamed to fool your old daddy so!"

"How is that—in allowing him to escort me home?"

"As if you did not understand! But the escorting came the other way. It was you who escorted me home. Many's the time you have led me around, like a—"

"Now—now don't, daddy! I know what you are going to say, and I do not like to hear you talk so."

"But the fact remains that I am blind, my little Zoe—blind, blind, blind!"

She tried to silence him with caresses, a look of intense sorrow and pain clouding her sweet face. It was very hard for the strong man to become reconciled to the terrible misfortune that had fallen upon him, and sometimes he rebelled against it bitterly.

"Aren't you glad I'm back, daddy?"

"To be sure I am," he replied, kissing her on the forehead. "I am always glad to have you near. Now that God's bright sunlight has been snatched from me forever, you are the light of my life. Without you I would have nothing in all the wide world—nothing, nothing!"

Then he strained her tightly to his broad breast, murmuring, almost fiercely:

"And must I lose you some time? I fear so! My God! my God!"

Little Buttercup looked frightened.

"Don't, daddy!" she gasped. "You hurt me, and you look so wild and speak so strangely! You scare me!"

He closed his bearded lips to shut back the groan that rose to them, relaxing his clasp in a measure but still holding to her as if he feared she might slip away.

"Don't mind me, little one," he entreated, as tenderly as a woman could have spoken. "I know I must seem queer to you sometimes, but you must remember how bitter it is for me to endure this eternal darkness. And when I think of losing you—"

"Of losing me? Why should you think of losing me? I am not going to leave you, daddy dear."

The blind man drew her close again.

"Of course you are not going to leave me now, but we cannot tell what the future may bring forth."

"Oh, don't let's think of that! I am going to stay with you forever and ever."

"But you are growing older."

"O-o-old! Why, it doesn't seem as if I ever should get to be a young lady! The years do creep so slowly!"

"They will fly all too swiftly soon. It is true that you are still your daddy's little girl,

but the time is close at hand when you can be called a little girl no longer."

"Oh, I'm so glad!"

Again that look of pain swept across the unfortunate's face.

"And I am sorry. I hate to lose my little girl even in the change that will make her a young lady. It will almost seem as if my merry little Zoe is dead and buried!"

"How horribly you do talk to-night, daddy! You make me shiver. Is this one of your blue spells?"

"One of my *black* spells, child!"

She slipped from his grasp and stood regarding him pityingly. He dropped his face in his hands a moment, then sprung to his feet throwing his strong arms upward in a gesture of despair.

"Black, black, black!" he groaned. "Oh, the sunlight—the glorious sunlight! Lost to me forever—lost! There is nothing left for me but to grope through life in darkness and go down into the darkness of the grave! And I am strong—I have all the strength of manhood! It is useless, useless! If I were an invalid I might endure it better, but this blindness and this unrequited longing to do, do, do—it is horrible!"

The girl tried to speak, but a great lump in her throat choked back the words. The unhappy man continued, wildly:

"I sometimes feel as if I were going mad. Oh, I have such a longing to see—to see the mountains, the trees, the rocks—anything, anything! I can scarcely realize I am never to see again. It is too horrible! I am strong, but I cannot work. We have nothing to keep the wolf from the door. Only a little time ago I could work, but I took no thought of the future. My money all went as fast as I earned it. If I had saved it, my child would not be forced to sing for such sums as those who hear her may see fit to give. I did not know the sin of wastefulness! I feel its curse now!"

He sunk back into the chair, and Little Buttercup crept softly to his side, her arm once more stealing round his neck, while she sobbed:

"Don't talk so, daddy—please don't! It makes me feel so—so bad!"

He caught at her convulsively.

"No, I won't, little one!" setting his teeth firmly. "Don't mind what I have said. Tell me about the man who came home with you and how it happened."

Then Little Buttercup told of her adventure in the saloon and how the handsome man had come to her rescue, hurling the drunken insulter to the floor.

"He was such a splendid-looking fellow!" exclaimed the girl, enthusiastically. "And he was so brave I could not help admiring him."

"Is he a young man?"

"Oh, no!" she replied, innocently. "He is more than twenty-five, I am sure."

"And is that so very old?" asked her father, soberly.

"It seems real old to me. Why, it will be nine whole years before I am twenty-five! I shall be quite an old woman then!"

He smiled faintly.

"Have you ever seen this man before?"

"Yes, lots of times. He came to Jericho a short time after you were hurt."

"And that was almost a year ago. It seems an age! What is his name? Did he tell you?"

"Yes; it is Harold Durgan."

"Durgan, Durgan? I do not think the name is familiar to me. Did he have much to say?"

"Oh, yes—lots!"

"What did he talk about?"

"Mostly about my singing."

A slight frown wrinkled the blind man's brow.

"What did he say about it?"

"He said it was fine and all I needed is a tutor to make me a great singer, so I could go on the stage and earn such *piles* of money."

"But you never shall—you never shall!" cried Bent, fiercely. "I'd rather see you dead—if I could see!"

"Of course I will not do anything against your wishes, daddy."

"Oh, I know that! Don't mind my outbreak! Go on; what more did he say?"

"He said it was a shame for me—" But she stopped suddenly.

"Oh, I know!" the blind man burst out. "He said it was a shame for you to sing around for a pittance—and he was right! What made you go into the saloon, Zoe? You know I have warned you to stay away from that place."

"But there were so many people in there I thought I would surely do well."

"Did you?"

"No, I received nothing, for that drunken man spoiled it all before the people gave me any money. But—"

"But what?"

"Mr. Durgan said he would show me an easier way of earning money, and he gave me some."

Blind Bent leaped to his feet, his face black as a storm-cloud, as he thundered:

"He gave you money? He said that? Where is the money he gave you? You have it—yes? You must return it to him—every cent of it! The miserable villain! Oh, I wish I had my

sight! My God! I wish I had my sight! You will give him back the money—you must! Curse his black heart!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WILES OF THE SERPENT.

MORE astonished and alarmed than ever by the savage outbreak of her father, Little Buttercup sunk into a chair, covering her face with her hands, and began to weep bitterly.

"If I could see," grated Bent, striking his clinched fists together, "they would not dare insult my child! I would shoot the man who did it as quick as I would shoot a mad dog! It is not best for him that the blind man gets his hands on the dastard's throat! Oh, you ought not to have taken the money—the cursed money, child!"

"But I did not know," sobbed the frightened girl. "He was so kind, and—"

"So kind! The wily devil! But he shall not succeed in his dastardly game!"

"I did not think it was wrong to take his money, and he urged me so! He said he should almost feel offended if I did not accept it, and I did not want to offend the gentleman."

"The snake! He said he should feel offended! But you will give it back—you will return it at once!"

"To-night, father?"

"Yes, yes; as soon as you can get to him!"

"But it is dark—very dark, and—"

"Dark? I had forgotten. It is always dark to me. Then you must wait till morning. Oh, no! You must not go out into the darkness! 'Tis there in the shadows the human fiends lurk and wait for their prey! Their hearts are black and they love the darkness of the night! The gloom conceals their evil deeds and does not betray the brand of Satan on their foreheads. Like wild animals of prey they leap from covert on their victims and drag them down—down to ruin and death! And their chosen victims are always the good, the pure, the beautiful! In their innocence they do not penetrate the devilish designs of their destroyers. And you—you, my darling child!—you have been chosen as the prey of one of these accursed human harpies!"

His looks, his gestures, his words were so tragic and appalling that the girl uttered a scream of terror and came near fainting. It was horrible to see his sightless eyes rolling in their sockets and hear his fierce words come thundering from his bearded lips.

But he suddenly clasped both hands to his head and reeled as if about to fall.

"I must be mad," he groaned—"mad to talk thus to you! In my excitement I forgot myself completely. You must not mind me, Zoe! Oh, you won't mind my foolish talk, will you? You must forget it. You are not old enough to understand such things. I would to Almighty God your mother had lived! She could have explained to you the things of which I know not how to speak. Oh, the fearful, the irreparable loss a child sustains in the death of a true Christian mother! And your mother was the best and noblest woman in all the wide world, my darling!"

He groped for a chair, found it and sat down.

"I can hear you sobbing, Zoe," he said, tenderly. "Please don't cry any more! It is all right; there has been no harm done yet. With God's aid I will guard against any harm coming to you! I ought to be able to fend it off for a time. We will say no more about this now. There will be plenty of time to talk it over in the morning. You had better go to bed now."

She left the chair and came softly to his side. "You are not angry with me, daddy?" she whispered.

"Oh, no, no, no!" catching her again in his embrace. "I am not angry with you, my little Zoe. I told you I was having one of my black spells. Do not worry your blessed little head over my ravings. It is all right—all right. Get your sleep, my child, and may your dreams be pleasant."

He kissed her tenderly, but she clung to him and would not depart till he had kissed her again and again. Then he arose and went with her to the door of the little room in which she slept.

"Good-night, daddy."

"Good-night, my child. God guard and bless you!"

He turned back to pace the small cabin room for five minutes, then he stole to the door of her room and paused there to listen. He could hear her voice. She was praying. Her mother had taught her the custom when she was a tiny child.

It was long past midnight when Blind Bent lay down himself, and even then he did not fall asleep at once.

When Little Buttercup arose in the morning her father was still sleeping. There was a peaceful smile on his face, as if his dreams were agreeable, and she refrained from arousing him.

"Poor daddy!" she said, softly, as she left the little cabin for a stroll in the morning air. "He is so changed since that terrible accident!"

Tom Bent's cabin was situated beyond the outskirts of Jericho, but the girl did not turn her footsteps toward the town. Instead, she

strolled slowly away down the trail till she had quite passed out of sight of the camp and disappeared beyond a bend in the rocky and precipitous walls of the gorge.

It was a glorious morning, and Little Buttercup soon forgot the unpleasant scenes of the previous night. As she slowly walked along she warbled little snatches of the merriest songs she knew; but not until she came close to him did she notice a man who was seated on a boulder beside the trail, watching her with admiring eyes. Then she halted with a little exclamation of mingled amazement and fear, for she recognized the man who had escorted her from the saloon the night before—Desperate Durg.

The man of dark record instantly arose to his feet and lifted his hat with courtly grace and politeness.

"If it isn't my little friend of last night!" he exclaimed, warmly. "I am delighted to meet you again, Miss Zoe."

How handsome he was! how pleasant he seemed! And his dark blue eyes met hers so frankly! Could it be he was a bad man? Still, remembering her father's words, she drew back doubtfully. A slight cloud came over the man's face as he saw this.

"Can it be you have forgotten me—do not recognize me?" he cried. "I am Harold Durgan, who saved you from that drunken ruffian in the Metropolitan last night."

"I remember," confessed Little Buttercup.

A look of pleasure flashed from his eyes.

"I thought it could not be you failed to recognize me. I scarcely expected such a pleasant meeting when I rambled down this way to get the morning air."

The girl fumbled in her pocket and drew forth the two silver dollars he had given her the night before.

"Here, sir," she said, holding them out to him, "I cannot keep these."

Durg looked amazed.

"Cannot keep them?" he echoed. "What is the matter with them? Are they bogus? You do not mean to say I gave you bad money?"

She shook her head.

"I think the money is all right, sir; but I cannot keep it."

"Well, that is singular!" he said, a puzzled look on his face, not offering to accept the money.

"Why cannot you keep it?"

"Daddy will not let me."

Durg whistled softly.

"Oh—oh! that is it! Well, well! What is the matter with him?"

"He is blind, sir," was the innocent reply.

Durgan put his hand to his face to conceal a slight smile.

"Yes, I know he is blind. But why does he refuse to let you retain this money?"

"Oh, he says it is not right for me to keep it."

"I declare that is the most singular thing I ever heard of! I cannot understand it at all. What can there be about it that is wrong? You did not get a cent in the saloon, and if you had not been molested, you might have received five or ten dollars. I heard you sing, and I saw fit to give you two dollars for the satisfaction of listening to the sweetest voice I ever heard. It was purely a matter of business, one might say. I paid for what I received, and I cannot consent to take the money back."

Little Buttercup looked distressed.

"Oh, you must!" she cried—"you must!"

Durg laughed at her earnestness, saying coaxingly:

"Sit down on this boulder, Miss Zoe, and we will talk it over. Perhaps I can convince you your father is in error. Now do not refuse a little request like that. How can you refuse under the circumstances?"

She felt as if she could not, for had not this man been kind to her? Had he not saved her from insult at the hands of a ruffian? Falteringly, she permitted him to lead her to the rough seat.

"There," he laughed, flinging himself on the ground in a reclining position at her feet, half supported by one elbow, "now we can talk it over."

His position enabled him to look her fairly in the face and fascinate her by his own graceful talk and elegant manner. He knew his power, and he felt quite like exercising it just then.

"Won't you please take the money?" entreated the girl.

"Wait a minute. By Jove! what a complexion you have! How do you keep it? Most girls are either brown or faded; your cheeks are like a ripe peach. But what am I talking about? I hope you will not mind. I sometimes speak before I think. It is not your beauty we are going to talk about."

Zoe could not control her blushes, for she was quite unused to flattery from any one except her father. Durg took good care not to venture too far on uncertain ground.

"Now about this money. I think your father has quite misunderstood my motive. It is not a gift to you, but is in payment for the gratification received while listening to your songs. I surely have as good right to pay you for singing as others have. It cannot be your father was in his right mind when he said you must return it. How did he act?"

"Oh, very strangely! He talked so wild-like it scared me."

"I thought so," nodded the man, gravely. "Evidently that accident injured him besides destroying his sight."

"What can you mean?"

"His mind is injured. Brooding over the loss of his sight probably makes it worse. His head is filled with wild fancies, I presume, and so he took a notion it was wrong for you to keep this money. It must be you need it?"

"Yes," Buttercup slowly confessed, "we need money to buy some provisions."

"Then you shall keep it."

She started in alarm.

"No, no; I can not! You do not understand. He will ask me about it, and I must tell him I have returned it. You would not have me tell a lie, would you?"

"Of course not," Durg hastened to say. "We can easily arrange that. I will take the money."

"I am so glad!" and she eagerly thrust it into his hand.

But, laughingly, he caught her fingers in his grasp and held them fast.

"Now you see I have the money," he said, holding up the two silver dollars. "You have kept your promise and returned them to me. You can tell your father that without speaking a falsehood." Then he put the money back into her hand, closing her fingers down over it, adding: "But now I give the money back to you. It is yours to keep, and no one need know a thing about it—not even your father. See?"

Zoe caught her breath and turned pale.

"But—but," she faltered, "it would be deceiving him."

"In a good cause. If his mind is becoming broken, you will find it absolutely necessary to deceive him many times. It will be impossible to always let him know all your acts, for he will misconstrue them. He will be sure to imagine some one is thinking of harming you. As if any one but a brute would plot injury against a little girl like you! Your father cannot see to act as your defender, but if any one ever does you an injury, come to me, and they shall answer for it dearly. I like you because you are so pretty and remind me so much of a dear little sister whom I lost many, many years ago. You have her innocent brown eyes, her blushing cheeks, her soft golden hair. Dear little Bess!—But you will keep the money—of course you will!"

Charmed by his smooth tongue and subtle flattery, Little Buttercup consented, thus taking the first false step.

CHAPTER XV.

PLAYING A BOLD HAND.

"AND now," said the schemer, "I would like to hear you sing. Won't you sing the same touching song that had such an effect on the men in the saloon last night? The air has been running in my head ever since."

"Which one do you mean, sir?"

"The Lips I've Often Kissed—I think that is the title. It is very pathetic, for it recalls the memory of the old mother that is gone from us forever. Won't you sing that for me?"

To please him, the girl sung the song; and never did her voice sound sweeter than at that moment. The delicacy of expression, the exquisite tenderness, the wonderful power she threw into the touching little piece was simply marvelous. When she had finished there were tears in the man's eyes.

"That voice should be your fortune!" he exclaimed. "It is wonderful, wonderful! All you need is instruction to become a marvel. The day will come when you will astonish the world."

"But daddy is not in favor of having my voice cultured."

Durgan started up in amazement.

"What?" he cried.

Little Buttercup repeated her words.

"Why, the man is crazy without a doubt," nodded the schemer. "It would be a sin to hide the melody of that voice from the world!"

"But he thinks it is a terrible thing to go on the stage as a singer."

"Nonsense! It is plain that his head is filled with wild ideas. With your face and your voice, you can literally roll in wealth. Instead of having to sing for a paltry dollar or two, you will be able to earn thousands of dollars nightly. You can ride in a fine carriage and have servants to wait on your every want. Life will all be one grand, beautiful holiday. Compare that with your present existence and see which you choose."

The girl's eyes glowed and her face flushed.

"Oh, it would be grand!"

"Of course it would," smiled Durg, retaining his ground and cautiously, yet boldly, advancing. "All you need is a man of money to back you and pay for your lessons and—"

"Oh, but I could not consent to be so indebted to any one!"

"Don't you worry about that, my child. Whoever consents to stand behind you will see his remuneration in the perspective. You will be able to repay every cent with a round sum for interest."

"But I know daddy will never consent."

"Possible he can be brought to see the advantage of it. Money is a mighty persuader. If he is not totally deranged, he will not stand in the way of your good fortune when he understands it fully. It is plain he has wrong ideas of the professional stage. It is scarcely like the stage in Gilson's saloon."

Little Buttercup looked interested, and he told her all he knew about the stage and the people of the theatrical world, painting every thing in the brightest colors. His success was all he could ask, for she became quite excited and enthusiastic.

"And if I sung on the stage and earned so much money I could take care of poor daddy. He should never want for a thing. Oh, that would be splendid! But"—a sudden cloud passing across her face—"I could not give him back his sight. I would do anything—anything to restore his sight!"

"Now how do you know you could not give him back his sight?"

She sprang to her feet, panting:

"What do you mean—what can you mean?"

"Money will work wonders," smiled the schemer.

"But his sight is destroyed."

"So he had been led to believe by the doctor who examined him, but what did that doctor know? He was nothing but a common quack who was driven out of the East and came here. He kept himself full of liquor all the time and was no more fit to attend your father than I am fit to look after such a difficult case. He could not help your father, because he did not know enough or he was too drunk. It is a blessing that he is not alive to continue his malpractice on such victims as would surely fall into his hands."

"And do you really think—"

"I think it possible your father's sight might be restored by some of the great oculists. But it costs immense sums to consult them and engage their services."

Zoe caught her breath, convulsively, a great light dawning upon her.

"If—I—could—sing—on—the—stage," she said, slowly. "Oh, I understand it now! With the money I received I could pay to have my daddy's eyes cured!"

"That is it," nodded Durg. "Now you have hit it. It would not take you long to earn enough to pay for the most costly operation."

"But how am I to receive the necessary instructions?" eagerly asked the excited girl. "I have no money to pay for them, and I know of no one who would furnish it."

"Perhaps I could find some one."

"You?"

"Yes."

"Oh, if you only could!"

"But you might have to go away from Jericho to some place where you could be instructed."

A shadow fell on her face.

"I couldn't," she said, shaking her head. "Daddy'd never let me."

"There is no telling what he may be brought to consent to—Hello! Who is that?"

A female figure was coming slowly along the trail from the camp. It was Barbara Howland, and she was walking in a deep reverie, with her eyes fixed on the ground.

"Gods!" gasped Desperate Durg, leaping to his feet. "That figure! Can it be? It is utterly impossible! Great Scott! Are my eyes playing me a trick?"

Little Buttercup looked at him wonderingly. He turned on her, hissing almost fiercely, as he caught her by the shoulder:

"You must get away from here as quick as you can! Now don't be frightened! I'm not going to hurt you. But you must not remain here another instant. I will explain the next time we meet. Go!"

He gave her a push that started her along the trail, and she did not stop. She was frightened, although she could not understand what it all meant, and she hurried from the spot, soon passing Barbara almost at a run.

Durg sprang behind a mass of boulders, snarling softly:

"Curse the infernal luck! Something has gone crooked! Somebody shall pay dearly for it! I little dreamed of seeing her here now. But I must meet her boldly and play a steady hand, or the game is lost."

Quickly binding a handkerchief around his head, as if he had received an injury, he replaced his hat and boldly advanced to meet the approaching girl.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CRAFT OF A LUCIFER.

"GREAT heavens, Barbara!" cried the double-faced plotter as he rushed with outstretched hands. "Is it truly you? I can scarcely believe my eyes!"

The girl halted in surprise, then a look of astonishment and pleasure greeted him.

"Yes, it is I," she laughed, almost hysterically, as he caught both her hands in her warm pressure. "I am here in flesh and blood; but I almost feared I should not find you here."

She almost feared she would not find him! His heart gave a triumphant bound.

"You would not have found me if you had come a little later," he declared; "for, with twenty bold companions, I should have been among the mountains searching for you and the villains who tore us apart."

"There is no need of that now."

"True, true! But how comes it you are here? How did you escape from the clutches of the dastardly gang?"

"I found a friend among them."

Durg started.

"A friend among the outlaws?" he questioned, in amazement.

"Yes."

"That was strange, indeed! Who was it?"

"I do not know; he would not tell me his name."

"Can't you describe him?"

"No. He kept his face closely masked."

A shade of disappointment showed on Durg's face for an instant.

"That is too bad! It would have been pleasant to have known this man. Perhaps he is some unfortunate fellow who has fallen into bad company."

"I am sure he is, for he confessed he was heartily sick of the life he was leading. But he has left the band, never to return."

"Ah?"

"Yes, he conducted me into town, and then suddenly left me; but he told me he should not go back to his evil companions."

"It is quite probable it would not be very healthy for him," laughed Durg, a trifle savagely. "But tell me how he worked the little trick of getting you away without being hindered by the others of the gang."

In a few words Barbara told him all about her adventures. He listened closely, and warmly congratulated her on her good fortune when she had finished.

"Fate surely favored you that time," he declared. "But that fellow who turned traitor to his companions deprived me of the pleasure of rescuing you from their clutches. I would never have rested till I had found you and torn you from their grasp. I had engaged men to help me who know almost every foot of the country for hundreds of miles in every direction, and we were determined to hunt this gang of desperadoes to the death."

"Which puts me deeply in your debt."

"Oh, do not mention it!"

"But I shall not forget it. Now you must tell me of your own adventures. When I last saw you, you were struggling in the grasp of several foes. They had hurled you to the ground and flung themselves upon you. A blindfold was fastened over my eyes, and my hands were tied behind me; but I heard heavy blows and a groan. Then they said they had 'fixed' you."

"If they thought they had killed me, they made a big mistake; but they did send my wits wool-gathering for a time."

"You have been injured upon the head?"

"Only a little knock. It is nothing."

"Nothing! I heard one of those brutes say it would be a wonder if your skull was not cracked."

"Ah! my skull is harder than they thought. It only knocked me senseless for a time."

"And when you recovered—"

"I found myself lying where I fell. The masked desperadoes were gone—you were gone."

"They had dragged me away to their den."

"At first I was so weak I could not stir, but after a time I roused myself and sat up. I could not remember for a long time what had happened, but after awhile it all came back to me. Then I was nearly frantic. The villains had confiscated my horse, but I started to follow their trail on foot. I had my weapons. I know not why they failed to disarm me. But I must confess I am not an expert trailer, and it was not long before I quite lost the track they had left behind them. I searched for it in vain, but was forced to give over the attempt. Then I turned my face toward Jericho City, resolved to organize a band of men and hunt down the dastardly kidnappers. I reached town early in the evening, and before midnight I had a band of twenty pledged to follow me to the spot where the outlaws sprung their trap. Then an expert trailer was to get in his fine work. Every one of my men are fighters, for we expected a tough battle with the brigands."

"You can dismiss them now, unless you feel it a duty to put an end to the desperado gang."

"I shall be in for hunting down the villains, but some of the others may lose their enthusiasm when they learn you have escaped."

"I fear those wretches may give me more trouble."

"There is great danger of it. It was quite foolhardy of you to venture outside the limits of the camp."

"You think—"

"Your enemies will kidnap you again."

"They shall not take me easily," she declared, bravely. "I have secured a heavier revolver than I carried before, and, as I have heard them say in this part of the country, I shall 'shoot at the drop of the hat.'"

"By this time you should understand how powerful they are. One girl or one man is scarcely a match for such a gang of desperadoes."

"Still I saw one man put three of them to rout," she laughed, looking into his eyes; "and he did it by simply speaking his name."

"Well—ahem!—you see that was an exceptional case," smiled Durg. "Besides that, he had already terrified them by shooting one of their number before their eyes. And he held the drop. That counts a right good heap, to speak in the vernacular."

"And he was a brave man. I presume that counted a little."

Durg flushed with pleasure.

"I am afraid you are laying it on too thick, if you will pardon my English," he laughed.

"Not at all; it is the truth."

"You have probably heard the truth should not be spoken at all times."

"It almost seems as if I had heard that remark."

"But speaking of future trouble from your enemies, are you not afraid they may be laying in wait for you even now?"

She shook her head.

"It is too soon."

"Too soon?"

"Yes. It was past midnight when I escaped from their hands."

"Heavens! You should be abed now, obtaining some rest."

"Ah! but I had a nap in the really comfortable chamber the outlaws had fitted up for me."

"You slept there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, your nerve is wonderful! I should have thought you would have cried your eyes out."

"Oh, I took my turn at that!" she confessed, with charming frankness. "But I knew it would not do me a bit of good to spend the night in tears, and"—with a coy glance at his face—"it was sure to injure my complexion and make my eyes look bad."

He stared at her in wonder.

"Well," came slowly from his lips, "you never were like other girls. I expect it was that which made you so fascinating to me. You were out of the usual order—distinct, original, charming!"

"And you always had one great fault—you were inclined to indulge in flattery."

"I deny the charge!" he laughed. "My only fault is in speaking my mind too frankly. But it is not this we were discussing. It was your danger."

"I am sure I am in no danger now."

"What makes you so confident?"

"As I told you, it was past midnight when I escaped from the den of the mountain desperadoes. At that time all the band save my unknown friend were locked fast in slumber—a slumber from which they would not awaken for hours. It is doubtful if they have thoroughly come to themselves even now. And if they have, it is still doubtful if they are aware of my escape, for the friend who aided me to get away was to be my attendant. The others were in no way interested in looking after me."

"In that case, your escape may not be found out for hours."

"That is the way I reasoned, and, as I felt a longing for a ramble in the morning air, I ventured out."

"But you will not be so reckless hereafter?"

"Oh, I assure you I have no desire to fall into their hands again!"

"I suppose not. Fortune has favored you twice, and you should beware of the third time."

"But I have so much to think of that I wished to get away here alone, where I could review it all in my mind."

"You had better do a big amount of reviewing this morning, and stay close in the hotel hereafter. Meantime, I will see what can be done about routing these rascally kidnappers of handsome girls out of this part of the country. When the coast is clear, as it soon will be, you can ramble wherever you choose, fearless of molestation."

"I hope that time will come soon."

"Oh, it will! These outlaws are quite a new departure in this section, but they will not remain here long. I am sure they will not find it a healthy locality."

"I have determined to sift the matter of those decoy letters. I desire to know who my enemy is, and why I have been lured to these parts."

"I admire your pluck, and you may depend on me to aid you in every way possible. I am ready to do any thing—any thing for you, Barbara!"

He lowered his voice almost to a whisper, and fixed his dark blue eyes on her face in a manner that brought the warm color to her cheeks. There was something fascinating about the handsome and crafty rascal, and he had quite deceived her with his fine acting and his lying tongue. Once she fancied she saw the villain beneath his polished exterior, but now she felt she had deceived herself. He was honest and true, for all of his faults.

And so the snare was still wound about her,

even when she fancied she had escaped from its entangling folds.

"I think I will continue my walk," she said, somewhat confused. And then, before he could offer to accompany her, she added: "You know I want a chance to think it all over by myself, and I must soon return to the hotel. I will see you again. Good-by, for the present."

She gave him her hand for a moment, but drew it away gently, as he would have held it; then she walked away along the trail. He stood and watched her till she had disappeared beyond a second bend in the gorge.

"I would sell my soul to possess her and her wealth!" he whispered, hoarsely. "And she shall be mine—I swear it by high Heaven! I am not a man to be balked, and although the game went against me on the first deal, it is sure to be mine in the end. The cards are running a little bad just at present. She is here in this town—and *he* is here! They must not meet! It would ruin everything! Either I must get her out of town at once, or she must keep close in her room at the hotel till he is disposed of effectually. I am satisfied this is the critical point in the game, and I have my hands full. But with the backing he has, Desperate Durg is sure to come out at the top of the heap."

Villainy is often defeated and crushed in the hour of its greatest triumph.

CHAPTER XVII.

GOLDGLOVE GID'S SINGULAR ACT.

GOLDGLOVE GID had made a resolution to see the sweet singer of the saloon again. He had taken a great interest in Little Buttercup, and he felt as if the girl's pretty face had caused her to be selected as the intended victim of a smooth-tongued and unscrupulous rascal. He resolved to warn her blind father to have a care that his child was not deceived by the handsome villain who had protected her from the drunken cowboy.

But first he inquired about Desperate Durg, and found that the fellow was one of the leading men in Jericho, gambler though he was known to be.

"Fate has thrown us together again," muttered Gid; "and I feel as if we should be pitted against each other. He is treacherous and bold, I know that by the past; but I shall delight to defeat any vile plot of his. I wonder where *she* can be? Surely, not here? She may be dead!"

A look of pain fled across his face, but he quickly turned to other thoughts.

"I almost believe an unseen power led me to this place that I might defeat Helos Boderick in some great scheme of villainy. Something tells me so. Within my heart there is a feeling of gladness that we are again to be matched against each other. Once, in the great contest of my life, he defeated me. He did it by foul means, I am sure; but, by fair means or foul, he cannot accomplish my defeat a second time."

The first thing in the morning Gid walked out along the trail to where he had been told Blind Bent's cabin stood. He approached the little home of the blind miner and his daughter, and discovered the door was standing slightly ajar. He advanced and was about to knock.

A hoarse cry came from within the cabin, and a man who came rushing wildly out ran straight into Gid's strong arms.

"Hello, my friend!" exclaimed the man of the gold-colored gloves. "I beg your pardon, but I was unable to get out of your way."

"Where is she?" gasped Blind Bent. "My God! my little child is gone—gone!"

"What's that?" cried Gid, a sudden fear that he was too late seizing upon him. "Gone—where?"

"My God—I do not know—I cannot tell! But I fear she has been lured away. I talked to her last night—talked a little hard perhaps. I don't know what I said. If that devil has—But who are you?"

"My name is Gordan. I am a new-comer in town. I heard your child sing in the saloon last night."

"And did you see her leave it with him—that tempting serpent? I know he is a villain; my heart tells me that! I heard his voice as he left her at the door, and a band of ice fell on my heart. I talked to her—I said some things I should not have spoken. She could not comprehend them. She is so young—so beautiful! But have you seen her—oh, have you seen her?"

"Not since last night when she left the saloon with him. He is—"

"Let me go!" Bent almost shouted. "I must find her! Perhaps it is not too late. I will have that devil's blood! Which way shall I turn?" Then clasping both hands over his sightless eyes, he groaned: "Great God! I am blind—blind!"

Goldglove Gid was at his side in an instant.

"Tell me all about it. When did you speak with her last? When did she go away? If you are blind, I am not, and I know the face of that treacherous devil. I give you my word—the word of a man—that if he has lured her away, I will follow them and do the work of vengeance for you by putting a bullet through his black heart!"

Blind Bent caught at Gid's hands.

"You will do that? I cannot see you, but

your voice has an honest ring—a manly ring. I will trust you."

"You shall not regret it. But answer my questions. When did she go away?"

"I do not know. She was here at midnight, for I did not lay down to sleep till then. I listened at her door and heard her breathing. When I awoke this morning she was gone."

"She may have gone out for a walk. It is not best to believe she has been lured away till it is impossible to believe anything else."

"Oh, she never leaves the cabin before I am awake. I always rise before the sun is up."

"How long have you been up this morning?"

"Not more than ten minutes."

"Then you have overslept, for it is a long time past sunrise. Your child may have left the cabin without waking you, thinking it best to let you sleep. It is a bright morning, and nothing would be more natural than that she should go for a stroll. The more I think of it the more confident I become that you have had your alarm for nothing."

"God knows I hope you are right; but I fear, I fear!"

"Then let your fear turn to joy, for your child is coming."

Little Buttercup was coming toward the cabin at a run, having seen her father and the stranger. In less than half a minute she was clasped in her "daddy's" arms, while the blind man fairly broke down and cried in his excitement and joy, kissing her again and again.

"I thought you had gone away, my little one!" he said, as he held her close. "I awoke and listened at your door, but I could not hear you breathing. Then I called your name. You did not answer! My heart ceased beating for a time, for you always answer when I speak your name in the morning. I called still louder. There was no reply. Oh, the horrible fear that came upon me then! I thought you were dead! I found my way to the bed, expecting to feel your rigid figure stretched upon it. It was empty! I believe the shock almost drove me mad. One terrible thought forced itself upon me. You were gone—you had left me—deserted your old daddy!"

"Why, how could you ever think such a thing of me?" she cried, reprovingly. "You know I would not do such a thing—I would not leave you for all the world, daddy!"

"True, true! I cannot doubt you, my little Zoe. But I am getting old. You must not mind if my head is filled with foolish fancies. If I could only see! Oh, it is a terrible thing to be old and blind!"

"But I am your eyes—you know you have often called me your new eyes."

"Yes, yes, yes! I would rather have you than the best pair of eyes in the world!"

And then, as he kissed her again, Gid walked softly away, leaving them together in their happiness. There was a new feeling in his heart, for he had witnessed a touching scene in the great drama of life.

"Helos Boderick may be plotting against that beautiful child," he muttered; "but I am here to block his game."

He sat down on a small boulder at some distance from the cabin, and a few minutes later Desperate Durg hurried past in the direction of Jericho. The plotter's head was bowed and his mind in a deep study over the sudden complication of affairs, and he quite failed to see the quiet figure by the side of the trail, or note the glitter of the clear blue eyes that watched his movements till he disappeared.

"I do not like that," muttered Gid. "The girl came from that direction. Can it be they met by appointment? By heavens! it looks that way!"

He sprang to his feet and started along the trail in the direction from whence Durg had come. For thirty minutes he walked slowly along, busy with his thoughts. At the end of that time he approached an immense sink-hole known as the "Devil's Drop." The stage-trail ran along the very verge of the abyss.

As Gid walked slowly along he gazed down into the great hole, thinking how a human being would be mangled and battered almost out of the semblance of humanity if one were unfortunate enough to fall upon the jagged rocks far, far below.

Suddenly he started and uttered an exclamation of amazement and horror.

Right there the bank sloped sharply downward for ten or fifteen feet and then fell perpendicularly to the bottom of the Devil's Drop.

At the point where the slope changed to a perpendicular, with her head and shoulders hanging over the very verge, lay a female form, only detained from taking the plunge into eternity by her dress, which had caught upon the sharp point of an upward projecting rock!

"Great heavens!" gasped Gid. "What can that mean—murder?"

Plainly the female was unconscious or dead.

"Can it be this is some of Helos Boderick's work?" came hoarsely from the man's lips.

But a second look told him it was not.

The unfortunate girl had plainly been reaching for a wild flower that grew a short distance down the bank and had lost her balance. The ground showed quite plainly where she

had slid to the very brink of death, from which she had been saved by the most wonderful good fortune.

Gid lost no time in setting about the rescue of the unlucky girl, for he felt as if her dress might give way at any instant and let her fall headlong to death.

With the greatest of care he descended the sloping bank, making careful note of the places where he could obtain firm holds for his feet. He was in constant terror lest he should misplace a stone that would strike the unconscious figure and cause it to take the fearful death plunge.

He reached a point where he could grasp the girl's dress, and he secured a firm hold. He worked with the greatest care and soon had her in his arms. Then he slowly worked his way up the bank to the level ground above, where he laid his burden gently down, a great sigh of thankfulness escaping his lips.

Not till that moment did he look on the face of the one he had saved. A fluttering sigh of returning consciousness drew his eyes toward her pallid countenance.

It was Barbara Howland.

With a hoarse exclamation of amazement, he started back as if he had seen a spirit.

"Great God!" he cried.

And then, as the eyelids quivered as if about to unclothe, he turned and rushed madly from the spot, leaving her there alone!

CHAPTER XVIII.

A VILLAIN'S TOOLS.

BACK into Jericho hurried Desperate Durg—now desperate indeed—and rapped loudly upon the door of a small cabin. Twice he repeated the knock and then he kicked the door savagely several times, cursing roundly the inmates of the cabin. At this he heard a stir within the hut, and a sleepy voice exclaimed:

"Bless the Lord! what's all this row about, anyway?"

"Open this door!" snarled Durgan. "Be lively about it, too, or I will come in there without waiting for it to be opened."

"Glory to the prophets! is that you, boss? Hold about two shakes and I'll let down the bars."

Durg waited impatiently, but did not have to wait half a minute before the door was opened by Pious Dick.

"Heaven be praised!" grinned the wizened rascal, in a sleepy manner. "I am right glad to behold you once more, Cap. Walk right into the parlor and recline in one of our elegant upholstered chairs. Every thing here is at your disposal."

Durg accepted a seat upon the box, which stood on end to serve as a chair.

"But what in the name of all the saints calls you here at this early hour?" questioned Dick.

"Business," was the curt reply. "Where is Slick?"

With a grin, Dick pointed to a figure curled up on the floor in one corner.

"What's the matter with him?"

"I think he staid out watching for the moon too late last night. There was a dew, and he absorbed too much moisture."

"He's drunk!"

"As a b'iled owl!"

The man of a dark record vented a curse.

"I have some talk to make to him. What did the fool fill up for?"

"Heaven only knows!" replied the little rascal. "He is not like other men. He can't stand a few good stiff sniffs. If he takes 'em, he's knocked out in ther mornin'. Now I've got a head as big as a prize squash, but I'm all right fer biz, you bet! Praise the King! I don't flop so easy."

"Well, I must talk to this fool. Get a bucket of water and chuck his head into it."

"All right," nodded Dick, catching up a bucket and darting out of the door.

In a short time he returned with it filled with water.

"Now we will proceed to arouse him from his beauty slumber," he grinned. "I will hold the bucket steady, Cap, if you will give him the grand duck."

Without a word, Durg arose and caught the man by a convenient part of the pantaloons and the nape of the neck and thrust his head into the clear cold, water. This caused an instant commotion, for Slick began to kick.

"Bless the Lord! see him squirm!" chuckled Pious Dick. "Give him another, boss."

Into the bucket went Samuel Slick's head once more. The unfortunate man kicked worse than ever and uttered a gurgling yell.

"That opens his windpipe," grinned Dick. "He will soon have his talking machine in working order. Baptize him again, Cap. It is our solemn duty to arouse him before it is everlastingly too late."

Once more did Durg thrust the man's head into the water, holding it there several seconds, while Slick kicked and clawed the air in the wildest manner imaginable.

Suddenly Durg released his hold on the self-styled officer, and in falling to the floor, Slick's head was wedged firmly into the bucket. Still kicking and clawing, he fell over on his side and then arose to a sitting posture with the bucket

sitting on his head like a tall hat that by a blow had been driven down over his ears to his shoulders. Of course, when he sat up the water poured out of the bucket and ran all over him, drenching him from head to feet. Wildly he struggled to remove the bucket from his head, some of the most dismal sounds imaginable coming from beneath the instrument of torture.

As for Pious Dick, he lay down on the floor and fairly howled with laughter.

"Oh, the Good Lord of Mercy!" he yelled, thumping the floor with his heels. "I know I shall die! I can't recover from this if I try! Ho, ho, ho! ha, ha, ha!"

With a savage wrench, Slick succeeded in removing the bucket, at the same time nearly removing his ears.

"Where's the fernal cuth thas played thish on me?" he gurgled, his mouth and eyes still full of water. "By g-g-gar! I'll has bish h'ar'sh blood!"

Then, as he rubbed the water out of his eyes, he saw Pious Dick fairly choking with laughter.

"So it was you, was it?" gritted Slick, speaking more plainly, and drawing a knife. "Well, I will try to settle the score."

Then he started to crawl toward the laughing fellow, an evil light burning in his eyes. But Durgan caught him by the shoulder.

"Put up that knife!" he commanded.

Slick stared at Durg in amazement.

"Put up that knife, you fool!" repeated the man of a dark record, harshly. "It was I who put your head to soak."

"You?"

"Yes."

"What did you do it for?"

"You were drunk."

"Was I? Well, I don't know but I was."

"I have to talk business with you, so it was necessary to arouse you some way."

"Of course, of course! That's all right, Cap. I beg your pardon."

The knife was put out of sight and the man arose to his feet.

"Here," said Dick, throwing him a blanket from the bunk, "wipe yerself off on that."

Slick quietly followed directions, wiping the water from his face and hair as well possible.

"Wish I could wipe my clothes dry," he observed, with a rueful grin.

"Ye'll have ter stand round in the sun and let them dry that way," said Dick.

Slick soon announced himself ready to listen to what Durg had to say.

"Well, to begin with, our prize has given her guards the slip."

"What?" shouted both the listeners together.

"Now keep your voices down off the high keys! We do not want to discuss this business so every one in Jericho will hear us."

"But who is it that's given the guards the slip? It can't be—"

"And still it is—the very little bird we again scooped yesterday. She has once more slid through our fingers."

"Good Lord!"

"How do you know, Cap?"

"Because she is here in Jericho and I have seen her."

"Is she onto your little game?"

"No, and I do not mean she shall get onto it. That is why I am here. There must be some lively work done."

"I'll 'low you're right!"

"But how did she work it—how in time could she?"

Then Durg explained how a traitor in the band had aided her to escape.

"Who is he?"

"He did not tell her his name, but I know well enough who he is."

"Of course he will—"

"Die the death of a traitor!" hissed Durg.

"But what's to be done?" asked Slick.

"The girl must be again recaptured, and that at once. She must not remain in Jericho twenty-four hours longer. If she does, all my plans will be ruined. But there is another piece of work on hand."

"What is it?"

"The capture or death of a very bad man."

"Who?"

"He calls himself Goldglove Gid, I have heard."

Both of the villain's tools started and looked serious.

"You have heard of him?" questioned Durg.

Slick nodded, while Pious Dick replied:

"Good Lord, yes! He is said to be one of the wust men in the country. When did he strike Jericho?"

"Last night. He is an old foe of mine. I have heard of Goldglove Gid, but I never dreamed it was Gideon Gordan."

"I hope you ain't goin' ter set either of us onter him," faltered Dick.

"Not if my first plan works all right. If it fails, then Slick must try his hand at arresting him on some trumped-up charge."

Samuel groaned and rubbed his hands over each other in a nervous manner.

"I do not expect you will succeed in putting bracelets on him, though I would me mightily pleased if you did," said Durg. "But I reckon I will have to be satisfied if you make the charge

against him, and circulate the story that he is a mighty mean sinner. Better charge him with stealing horses, for that will count the strongest against him. Then, if he suddenly disappears between sunset to-night and sunrise to-morrow morning, it will be thought he has fled to escape arrest."

Slick nodded, but looked decidedly weak-kneed.

"I'll bet he will salt me for keeps!" he said, huskily.

"No, he will not. If you do not reach for a gun, he will not down you. Have the irons ready, and do your best to get them onto his wrists."

"All right, Cap; but I shall say my prayers before I try the job."

Durg turned to Dick.

"And you will slip out of town some time this forenoon, and make your way to the retreat. Tell the boys where their bird is to be found, and bring back Molasses Pat and Big Sim with you. You should get here as soon as ten in the evening. Let them conceal their horses as near camp as possible and come to the Metropolitan. There will be work for them to-night. I will have the others ready by that time. Understand?"

"Yep."

"But now I have still another scheme which you fellows must try before you carry out either of these I have explained to you. If it works, it will not be necessary for you to attempt the others."

"What is it?" asked Slick, eagerly, anxious to avoid having an encounter with Goldglove Gid.

"At the present time Barbara Howland is out for a walk beyond the limits of the camp. She has gone down the trail toward Pick Pocker. You are to go down that way at once and see if you can scoop her in. If you are fortunate enough to succeed, one can come back for horses, and you can carry her back to the retreat as soon as possible. In that case, I will deal with Goldglove Gid myself."

"Then we'll scoop the girl," asserted Slick. "Why, I'll scoop anything before I will monkey with that infernal galoot who wears the gold gloves. Come on, Dick, you withered sinner!"

And together the two conscienceless scoundrels hurried from the cabin. Durg watched them till they had disappeared down the trail.

CHAPTER XIX.

BARBARA'S BROTHER.

SLOWLY consciousness returned to Barbara Howland. A touch of color crept back into the pale cheeks and lips, and her eyes unclosed.

"What—where—? Heavenly Father!"

With a mighty effort, she started up and stared wildly around her. Then a sobbing cry of relief and thankfulness came from her lips and she sunk down once more.

"I did not fall after all!" she exclaimed, joyously. "I thought I lost my balance and went sliding down the bank—down to death! I caught at the ground and the rocks, but nothing checked that fearful slide. Down I went until my head passed over the verge of the perpendicular fall and I could look down into the horrible abyss. Then I knew no more!"

She was silent a moment, and then started up, once more staring around.

"Was it fancy—could it have been? No, no! The ground there looks as if a body had slid from this spot and plunged over the crest of the bank there. What does it mean? There is a piece of my dress down there on that sharp point of stone—and here is where it was torn from the garment! Heavens! it must be I truly slid down this bank! But I did not fall! What checked my descent? How comes it I am here? There is some mystery about this!"

She was deeply puzzled, and well she might be. The more she thought of it the greater became her perplexity.

"It cannot be I got back here myself," she muttered. "And if I did not, how comes it I am here? Is it possible some good spirit prevented me from falling and brought me back to level ground? If not, then it must have been a human being; and if a human being, who was it?"

The question was too much for her; she was forced to give it up.

For a long time she sat there gazing in a fascinated manner at the track left by her sliding body. At length she arose to her feet, with a shudder.

"It might have been the easiest way out of my trouble," she thought. "My death would have been painless. But I am not going to try to get that flower and take my chances of going down there again. I have had quite enough of that kind of an experience for one day."

Adjusting her hat which had clung to her head through the entire adventure, she turned back toward Jericho. She had not gone far before she saw two figures swiftly advancing toward her. There was something familiar about them—something that sent a thrill of fear over her. She paused, thrusting her hand into her pocket and grasping the stock of her revolver.

"If they are foes, I shall not hesitate to use it," she murmured. "But I am afraid I can not

shoot very straight, for my nerves have been fearfully shaken."

Indeed, she was trembling from head to foot. As the men came nearer, she uttered a low exclamation of terror, for she recognized the crafty face of Samuel Slick. The oily-tongued rascal advanced with a smile on his smooth face, and a glitter of triumph in his watery eyes.

"Quite a surprise—quite a surprise, indeed!" he declared, washing his hands in imaginary water with great vigor. "I am delighted to see you again, my dear Miss Howland. I—"

"Stand back!"

Out came the revolver and the two tools of a treacherous villain were brought to an abrupt halt.

"I will put a bullet through either of you if he attempts to touch me!"

"Glory to Moses and the lamb!" exclaimed Pious Dick. "If she hain't fortified ag'in, may I be blessed!"

"I did hope you had gotten over such foolishness," asserted Slick, as if quite disappointed.

"I did hope you had come to your senses."

"You will not have any senses to come to, if you do not go away and leave me alone! I will drop you where you stand!"

"Lord save us! but hain't she a savage 'un!" grinned Slick's companion. "Jest look at them black eyes snap! Why, they almost dart sparks of fire!"

"It is useless for you to pit your woman's strength against us," declared the bogus officer. "There can be but one termination of such folly—we shall conquer. Here you have no friend to come to your aid as you had yesterday."

"Haven't I? You forget there is One above who is always a friend to the weak and the wronged!"

"Well, I hardly think He will interfere in this case."

"He is most likely 'tendin' to other business now, miss."

"Well, I hold the best hand just now. You cannot touch me while I have you under cover of this revolver; and there is no one to creep up behind me like a treacherous snake, as that creature there did yesterday."

At this both the men laughed, and Slick said:

"Are you sure of that? Perhaps you are mistaken. Grab her, quick, Bob, before she can fire!"

The last words were spoken in an apparently excited tone to some one behind the girl. It was an old ruse, but it worked with her. She turned quickly, with a little cry of fear.

Uttering shouts of triumph, the two men leaped toward her, caught her in their grasp, tore the revolver from her hand!

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Slick. "Very neatly done—very!"

But Barbara struggled desperately and shouted for help.

Her cry was answered.

A manly figure appeared on the scene, and, with two well-directed blows, sent the girl's dastardly assailants reeling to the ground.

"Dogs!" he grated.

Slick and his companion struggled up and found themselves covered by a pair of glistening revolvers.

"Get!" was the command that saluted their ears—"get before I bore you both!"

"Jack!" they gasped—"it's Jack."

"Yes," was the retort, "it is Jack."

"But, what do you mean by using your pards in this way?"

"I mean that I am done with them forever."

"You have turned traitor?"

"Call it that if you like."

"Bless the Good Lord!" cried Pious Dick. "I will allow he is ther galoot thet helped her escape from the retreat!"

"And for once you are correct, you smooth imp of sin. I am the very galoot."

"You will meet the fate of a traitor!" hissed Slick.

"Do you really think so? Well, let me tell you something. You are sure to meet the fate of a miserable villain and a criminal of the most contemptible type. There is a rope waiting for you even now."

Both Slick and his companion swore roundly, but Barbara's champion bade them be off or take the consequences. Snarlingly they slunk away.

When they had passed beyond pistol-shot, the young man turned toward Barbara. She saw at a glance that he was handsome and somewhat dashing in appearance. Holding out her hands, she cried, warmly:

"Once more you have befriended me, for I know you are my friend of last night. I cannot express my gratitude!"

He caught her hands and gazed earnestly into her eyes.

"Yes, you are right," he confessed. "Circumstances have compelled me to acknowledge it, although I did not mean for you to ever know."

"Why should you conceal the truth from me?"

"An outlaw is scarcely a person to be admired. But there was another reason."

"Another reason? What can it be?"
 "Barbara, Barbara! don't you know me? I am your brother!"

CHAPTER XX.

EXPLANATIONS.

"My brother!" cried Barbara. "Impossible! It cannot be! My brother is dead!"
 "Oh, no!" he laughed. "That is a mistake. I have never been dead to my knowledge."
 "But my brother John died in Australia."
 "How do you know?"
 "There were positive proofs of his death."
 "Those proofs were no good. It is true I went to Australia, but I did not die there by any means."

"I cannot bring myself to believe you are my brother. He was nothing but a boy when he ran away from home—"

"Because he had some trouble with his father and the old gentleman saw fit to chastise him severely."

Barbara looked doubtful.

"You know of that, but—but—"

"That is not all I know, I assure you," laughed the young man. "How is your old sweetheart, ragged little Joe Rogers? You know you told me once that you were going to marry him when you were old enough, because he thought you the finest girl in all the world."

Barbara's face crimsoned, and then a shade of regret and sorrow stole over it.

"Poor little Joe!" she said. "He might have become a smart man for all of his parents' poverty, but he took to drink and went to ruin."

"And how about your chum, Lizzie Jones? Lizzie was a pretty little girl and I used to have a sly liking for her myself."

"Oh, she is married and has a little girl of her own. She married Josh Burns."

"Do you remember the time I hung your doll to the yard-arm of an apple tree as a representation of Captain Kidd hanging in chains, and it remained suspended through a rain-storm that washed every bit of color out of its face?"

"Yes, yes; but—"

He laughed.

"Still doubtful? Perhaps there was some mark—"

"There was—a birthmark—a red cross on my brother's arm midway between the wrist and elbow."

Without a moment's hesitation, he thrust back his sleeve and showed his round, muscular forearm. The birthmark was there!

"Oh, John, John!" cried the excited girl; "is it really and truly you? It is too good to be true!"

He caught her in his arms, laughing though his eyes were filled with tears.

"Yes, little girl," he said, softly, "I am really and truly your brother."

She put her arms around his neck and kissed him in a true sisterly fashion, but with all the warmth natural under the circumstances.

"Why have you never returned or let us know a thing about you during all these long years?" she asked.

"When I went away," he replied, "I made an oath that I would never return till I was a rich man. All these years I have been in pursuit of the golden goddess, but she has eluded my grasp. I think I inherited some of my father's stubbornness, for, although my heart ached to see the old place and the father and mother and little sister I had left, I would not go back. I have ever been promising myself to return rolling in wealth, the envy of all my old schoolmates. I did not want it said I had come back to obtain my share of the property when my father died."

"And your pride has kept you from ever again seeing your father and mother. Both are dead."

"I know," he said, sadly, bitterly. "I have made a great mistake, but it is too late to atone for it now. From the story you told me in the cave of the Land Sharks, as the band of outlaws call themselves, I first learned of their death. It was difficult for me to keep from betraying my identity then, but I succeeded."

"You did, for I did not dream my brother still lived. I thought you acted very strangely at the time."

"But for the accident that made it necessary for me to protect you from those ruffians, you never would have known me as the person who aided you to escape from Captain Shark's clutches."

"I might have recognized your voice."

"It is possible, but you could not have been sure. Very naturally I had no desire for you to know me as an associate of outlaws—one of the wretched band!"

"If you have made false steps, there is plenty of time to recover."

"I trust so; and from this time on I shall make no attempt to obtain a fortune in any other than a legitimate and lawful manner. The life of a bandit is not what it is cracked up to be. It is hardly what I used to imagine after reading the fascinating tales of robber life which sometimes fell into my hands. Once my greatest ambition was to be a pirate or a road-agent."

Now my ambition is to live and die an honest man, known and respected as such. The life of a criminal may seem quite fine and tempting in a story, but in truth, criminals endure a miserable existence and almost always die a miserable death. I have barely escaped such a life, but I may not be fortunate enough to escape death at the hands of my former wicked associates."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Barbara, in alarm.

"I am a marked man."

"Marked?"

"Yes, I have proved false to the band of which I was a member."

"And they—"

"Will do their best to end my existence."

Barbara's face turned pale.

"Horrible!" she cried. "You must get out of this part of the country at once!"

"If I wish to live, I must."

"I have no reason for staying here longer, now I have found those letters were decoys. We will go together—back to the old Kentucky home."

"Yes, I will then be near to protect you from the devil who is plotting against you."

"You know who it is?"

"Captain Shark."

"And who is Captain Shark?"

"I only know him by that name. I have not been a member of the band long enough to be trusted with his true identity; but I am certain he is a prominent man in Jericho."

"Then you will be in great danger there?"

"I shall be in danger anywhere in these parts; but my danger is no greater than yours, and I am much better able to defend myself. However, the quicker we can get away, and the more secretly we can depart, the better it will be for us. We had better make arrangements to leave quietly under cover of darkness to-night. I will have everything ready, while you remain close in your room."

"How shall we leave?"

"It would not do to depart by stage, so we will go on horseback."

"Have you money to provide everything needed?"

He was obliged to confess it was doubtful.

"Well," smiled Barbara, "I have enough. When I came into these parts I took care to so conceal the greater part of my money that there would be little danger of its being taken from me. That precaution was a fortunate one."

"Fortunate, indeed!"

"When we reach the hotel I will produce the money and give you enough to obtain everything necessary. We have our horses."

"You may have yours," he smiled, "but I have none."

"How is that?"

"My animal met with a serious misfortune after I left you last night. It stepped into a hole and broke its leg. I was obliged to kill it. But for that, I would need none of your money."

"One-half of all I have is yours, brother."

"Oh, no! I cannot agree to that!"

"You will have to."

"Everything was left to you."

"Because it was thought you were dead. Had father known you still lived, one-half of everything would have been yours."

"He held no bitter thoughts against me?"

"No, no! On the contrary, the greatest regret of his age was that you had not lived to return home and receive your share of what he would leave behind at death."

"My kind old father—my poor mother! How I wronged them both!"

For some time they talked over the past and made plans for the future. At length they turned toward the camp and walked slowly along still talking. It occurred to Barbara that it might have been Jack who rescued her from the edge of the precipice, but, when she had told him about it, he disclaimed all knowledge of the affair.

As they passed Blind Bent's cabin, Little Buttercup came out, singing merrily.

"Listen!" exclaimed Jack.

They paused a moment, and were charmed and touched by hearing a stanza of "Home, Sweet Home" sung in a manner that brought tears to their eyes. Then Zoe saw them standing there and hurried into the house in some consternation.

"Who is that girl?" exclaimed Jack.

"Do not ask me," smiled Barbara. "Whoever she is, she has the most charming voice I ever heard."

"That is true, and she is pretty, too, or my eyes deceived me."

Barbara laughed.

"It is plain you have an eye for good looks; but she might not appear as well upon closer view."

"A girl that can sing like that can not be anything but pretty! It would be a bad break on nature's part to make her otherwise."

"I fear you are smitten! Can it be a case of love at first sight?"

"Hardly that, I guess," he smiled.

They walked slowly on, but before they had fairly entered the camp a bullet whistled past Jack's head and the distant report of a rifle came to their ears.

"The dogs are showing their teeth as soon as this," said the young man, bitterly. "It is plain they mean business."

CHAPTER XXI.

DURG'S FAIR ALLY.

DAISY WYLDGLOVE'S visitor after Lord Alfred Dumlin's departure from her room was Desperate Durg, and the man of a dark record having promised to aid her in disposing of her corpulent husband, she gave her word to aid him in turn. Then there was an unfolding of schemes.

Daisy was not an early riser, but she usually made her appearance before midday. A walk or a ride gave her a good appetite for the noon meal, called dinner in Jericho.

The forenoon after the night of Lord Alfred's appearance was well advanced when the actress made her way out to Blind Bent's cabin. The unfortunate miner was smoking in the sunshine outside the door, and Little Buttercup, humming a merry song, was attending to the household duties. Without a word, Daisy entered the hut.

"Abl good morning, my little housewife!" she cried, in a friendly way she well knew how to assume.

Zoe stared at her in surprise.

"Oh-o!" laughed the actress. "You look like you saw something that scared you. Am I such a frightful object?"

"Oh, no!" stammered Little Buttercup. "But—but it seems strange you should—come here."

"Strange? Why does it seem strange?"

"You have often passed, but you never came here before."

"And so it is strange I should take a fancy to come here now. I am afraid that is poor logic. You know I have a great head for logic—fact is, I am stuck on it—and when any one says a thing that is not logical, it jars harshly on my nerves."

Zoe looked awed.

"Now don't you get frightened!" laughed the little actress. "If you do not understand what logic is, that is not your fault. You see I have had the advantage of a superior education, and so I know all about such complex things as logic, syntax and trigonometry. But at your age I knew no more about them than you do. It was only after I took to singing on the stage and made such piles of money that I was able to pay for an education which gave me a position in the world."

Little Buttercup cast an anxious glance toward the door and made a warning gesture.

"Don't speak so loud," she cautioned. "If daddy hears you, he may be displeased."

"Displeased at what?" asked Daisy, in surprise.

"Displeased because you came here. He would not want me to talk with a stage singer."

The actress gave her head a toss.

"What's the matter with him?"

"Oh, he's blind, you know!" replied Zoe, her innocence leading her to make the answer, the same as she had to Durg's question a few hours before.

Daisy laughed.

"I know he is blind. That was not what I meant, but as you have not the advantage of an education, of course you do not understand."

The deceived girl reddened with shame at her own ignorance.

"I heard you sing in the saloon last night," added Daisy; "and that is what brings me here to-day. I never dreamed you possessed such a voice. I had heard something about your singing, but I supposed it would be like the singing of most any girl with a little ability. I was pleasantly surprised—I was amazed! You should train your voice and go on the stage, for you—"

Little Buttercup cut her short with a gesture, her face plainly showing her excitement.

"Don't say any more here!" she entreated.

"I am so afraid daddy will hear!"

"But I must talk to you. Cannot we go somewhere where we will be beyond his hearing?"

"We can go out."

"Then come on."

The girl did not wait for her hat, but led the way from the cabin, telling her father at the door that she was going out a short time.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Only a short distance, daddy."

"Who is it with you? I heard a strange voice within."

"It is a friend," Little Buttercup replied, with some hesitation.

"I am a visitor in Jericho, stopping at the hotel," explained Daisy. "I heard your daughter sing yesterday, and was so pleased I have made bold to seek her acquaintance."

Little Buttercup looked anxious and her father looked doubtful, but he said:

"Well, don't take her far. She's all I've got, and I like to have her near me all the time."

"Oh, we are only going a short distance out here into the sunshine."

Zoe kissed her father and followed the ally of the man who was plotting against her. When they had safely passed beyond earshot of the cabin, they sat down together on a grassy plot.

"Isn't this a glorious day!" exclaimed the ac-

tress, enthusiastically. "It is such days that make one feel life is worth the living. And this is such a charming spot! What a grand view we can obtain of the mountains yonder! I am so glad I have found this spot, for I shall come here often to admire the view."

"Yes, it is grand," said Zoe, but she did not glance at the scenery. "You were saying something about—about—"

"Look at that grand old peak!" cried Daisy, not seeming to hear her companion's words. "It is like a monarch amid its companions."

"About—about my singing," concluded the girl.

This was just what the actress wanted.

"She's hooked!" she laughed, to herself; but aloud she said: "What is it, my dear?"

"You were speaking of my singing."

"Oh, yes! to be sure I was! I had almost forgotten. I was amazed and charmed to hear you last night, and I resolved to speak to you about your singing. I want to hear you sing again, for I was behind the stage curtain last night and could not hear you to advantage. Won't you please sing the last song you rendered in the saloon?"

"Oh, but I cannot sing before you!" protested Little Buttercup.

"Why not?"

"You know all about singing, while I know so little about it—only what my father has taught me and what I have picked up in various other ways."

"I know more about the laws of music, child; but at the same time, I would give the world for your voice. No matter how well one understands music, they cannot become a good singer unless they have a good voice. My voice has been highly praised by the greatest musical critics, but I am honest and I will confess you have a much better voice than I. All it needs is cultivation."

Zoe blushed with delight.

"Oh, you make me so happy!" she cried in her frank manner. "I do love to sing! It gives me such delight!"

"All great singers feel that way."

"I will sing the song if you will not look at me. I fear I should break down and spoil it all if you watched me."

Daisy laughed.

"You silly child! Well, you will quite get over that some day. I will turn my eyes away. Go on."

Even then Little Buttercup hesitated, but she finally began. At first she did not do herself justice, but as she advanced she became more and more expressive as she forgot herself and grew enthused. The last lines were rendered in her best manner. It was a touching little piece, and when it was finished Daisy had her handkerchief to her eyes. Then followed a silence of several seconds.

Suddenly the actress turned and clasped Zoe in her arms.

"Oh, you dear child!" she exclaimed. "You do not dream of the fortune you possess in that voice! You are destined to make the world ring with your name!"

"But daddy will never consent for me to sing on the stage. He has queer ideas about it, and says he would rather know I was dead than a common stage-singer."

"I should say 'queer ideas!' 'Why, the man must be crazy! Here you are poor as Job's turkey. If you train your voice and go upon the stage, you will fairly roll in wealth.'"

"But it costs money to get a musical education."

"That is true, but there are rich men enough who will put up the scads."

"The scads?"

"Yes; the needful, you know—money. Show them it will be a paying investment, and they will jump at the chance. You can sing better than I, and I am able to make big figures in a year if I want to. My coming to this mining-camp is a whim. My head is full of whims. I might have a regular engagement at a big salary if I wanted it, for heaven knows I have had offers enough!"

"Should I have to dance as they say you do, if I went on the stage?"

"Oh, no! that would not be necessary at all. I do it because I can get better figures by combining the two accomplishments. If I possessed your voice, I would never dance a step, and I could make more money than I do now."

"And would I have to wear tights?"

"Oh, no, no!" laughed Daisy. "That would not be at all necessary."

"Oh!" cried Little Buttercup, "if daddy'd only let me!"

"Perhaps that can be arranged in some way. But I want to warn you of a certain man."

"Warn me?"

"Yes, of a tall, handsome man who—"

"Oh, surely you do not mean Mr. Durgan?" cried Zoe, tremblingly.

"No, you have nothing to fear from him. He is your true friend—a noble gentleman. You can put the utmost trust in him, and he will never deceive you. This other man—your enemy—has yellow hair and mustache. His eyes are blue, and he wears gold-colored gloves."

"Ah! I have seen him!"

"In the saloon last night?"

"No. He was here at the cabin this morning talking with daddy."

"Oh, he was! So he has begun his work against you?"

"Against me? What can he have against me? I do not understand it!"

"What an innocent child you are! I almost doubt if you know you have a pretty face. It is your face, child—your face! He is struck with your beauty and he wants to get his hands on you. He has begun with your father, and I am willing to wager he has told him some pretty lies about about Mr. Durgan. But whatever he says is false. Mr. Durgan is your friend, and one you can tie to, you bet!"

"I am glad to know it, for father thought he must be a bad man."

"Your father is blind, and his old head must be full of whims. It will not do for you to depend on all he says. You trust Mr. Durgan, and if he takes a notion, he will give you the musical education you need. He has the money to do so."

For some time longer Desperate Durg's ally talked to the deluded girl, paving the way for the villain to accomplish his evil designs against poor Zoe. Finally, she declared she must return to the hotel, and she gave Little Buttercup a hypocritical kiss before she left her.

"It's almost a shame!" she muttered, as she walked leisurely back into camp. "The child is as innocent as a dove. But it is none of my business. I have made a bargain with Durg to get rid of that fool of a man who has followed me here, and I shall keep my part of the contract."

In front of the hotel she came face to face with Jack Howland. She stopped short with an exclamation of amazement.

"Can this be you, Jack?" she cried.

He looked amazed and far from pleased.

"Yes," he confessed, "it is me; but how in the world do you happen to be here, Violet?"

"Oh, you dear fellow!" and she caught him by both hands. "I am so glad to see you! But I am not Violet Mayblossom here. I am now known as Daisy Wyldove."

A peculiar smile curled Jack's handsome mustache.

"So you are up to the old dodges, eh? But what are you doing here?"

"Same old business—singing and dancing. Are you stopping here in town?"

"For a short time."

"Then you must call and see me. Come right to my room—number 13. I shall be so glad to have you, and we will talk over old times. You have grown handsome, Jack! You are scarcely the boy I used to know."

"Thanks," dryly. "I think you are right about my not being the boy you used to know. I am somewhat older, and I think my brains are more level. I am very busy; you will excuse me if I do not call."

"Oh, Jack!"

What an amount of reproach she threw into her voice!

"You can't be so mean after—after all we once were to each other!"

He frowned.

"I trusted you would have delicacy enough not to mention that. It is very unpleasant to me. I was a silly boy then; I am a man now. You played me for a dupe, and it makes me feel ashamed whenever I think of it."

"And you will not even call to see me?"

"No."

Daisy's face fairly blazed, and without another word, she ascended the hotel steps.

"I will be even with you for this!" she savagely muttered to herself, casting a vicious glance after Jack's retreating form. "I am not the woman to be treated in that way. I—I hate you bad enough to kill you!"

Desperate Durg suddenly appeared at her side and hoarsely whispered:

"If you will keep watch of him that he does not slip out of town secretly, I will agree to do the killing for you!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A CRISIS APPROACHING.

DAISY uttered a little cry of surprise and alarm at Durg's sudden appearance and then broke into a nervous laugh.

"Oh, how you frightened me!" she exclaimed.

"Is it you, Mr. Durgan?"

"Sure," he replied. "I heard your words and gave you a pointer. But let's go up to your room. I have something I wish to say to you."

They ascended the stairs and entered the actress's room.

"So you know that dashing young fellow I saw you speaking with a moment ago?" said Durg.

"Didn't it look that way?"

"I will admit that it did."

"Well, we have met previous to to-day."

"An old flame, or something of that sort."

"A gentle pigeon," she laughed, a cruel look resting on her face for an instant. "I plucked him beautifully."

"And he refuses to have anything to do with you now?"

"That is about the size of it."

"He has been through the fire once and refuses to walk up and be roasted again. Well, you have not lost much. His pocket is as empty as a drum."

"It is not that I care for, but you see I really did have a liking for the fellow, and it cuts me fearfully to get the cold shoulder in this way."

"Oh—oh! that is how the land lays! Well, let me tell you the sooner you get over your liking for the fellow the better it will be if you do not want to shed some tears over his death."

"What do you mean?"

"He is a doomed man."

"Doomed?"

"Yes."

"By whom?"

"The men to whom he has proved a traitor. They have sworn to accomplish his death."

"Who are they?"

"That is not for you to know. But I have some work for you. This fellow is here with a young woman. I want you to watch him and discover his plans, if possible."

"Why?"

"The young woman with him is worth money to me, and I fancy they are planning to leave town quietly."

"You wish me to learn if this is true?"

"Yes."

"And my remuneration—?"

"Will be the quiet disposal of your corpulent husband. To-night will be a night of work—dark work!"

The little actress shuddered.

"And you want me to have a hand in your dark work?"

"No. I simply want you to do the watching. There are others who will bag the game."

"You wish me to watch Jack Duke to make sure he does not escape the men who are waiting to assassinate him?"

"Jack Duke—is that the name you know him by? His former comrades know him as Jack Stark. But I suppose, like others of us, he has a name for every place he stops in. It is not this Jack I care so much about; it is the girl with him."

"Yet you said if I would keep watch that he did not slip out of town secretly, you would do the killing."

Durg laughed.

"I was referring to your husband," he declared. "There are others who will dispose of Jack whether I keep track of him or not; but it is the girl I do not wish to lose."

"And who is the girl?"

"That is of little consequence to you. She is my game."

"It seems to me you have considerable game on hand just now. How about the little singer, to whom I have lately been praising your noble qualities, you black rascal?"

"I wish to speak of her too. I have decided to scoop her in to-night, and I wish you to aid me. You are to see her again to-day and get her to agree to meet you to-night after her father is asleep."

"You are laying out considerable work for me. You know I sing in the saloon this evening, as usual."

"You must attend to this between your first and second appearance."

"But what kind of an excuse shall I make to lure her out?"

"Anything—any excuse you can think of. Surely you have too much wit to lack for an excuse."

"Her father is to know nothing about it?"

"Of course not! You are to write a little note purporting to be original with Little Buttercup, and in the note you will say she has gone away with the handsome man of the gold-colored gloves to become a great singer. Catch?"

"Cert."

"You are to manage some way to leave the note inside the hut where old Bent or some one else will find it."

"Correct."

"When Little Buttercup comes out, you are to lure her as far down the trail from the cabin as you can. Be sure to get her down to the big black boulder. There three or four men will spring out and seize you both. She will be quickly bound and blindfolded, while you will be released. She will never dream of treachery on your part. Can I depend on you?"

"I never yet took a hand in such a villainous game, but now that I am fairly launched, I am not going to back out. You may depend on me."

"Good! Play your part well, and I will see that the work of ridding you of this bogus English lord is well done. Things are crowding and matters approach a crisis. I have all I can attend to for the rest of the day and night."

He turned and left the room abruptly; but barely had he stepped into the passage when he received a heavy blow fairly between the eyes, and a furious voice gurgled:

"You infernal scoundrel, what hare you doing in my wife's room? Hi will 'ave your 'art's blood!"

Lord Alfred had been seized by the green-eyed monster and was in a very ugly mood.

"You fat fool!" snarled Durg, reaching for

a revolver. "I will settle your hash right now!"

Milord was seized by a sudden fright and ran for the stairs. The hammer of Durg's revolver caught and prevented him from drawing it with his usual swiftness. And when he did get it out, fortune still favored Lord Alfred, for the self-cocking hammer rose and fell with a dull click, the tridge proving a bad one.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SEEN FROM THE WINDOW.

UTTERING a savage curse, Durg pulled the trigger again, but as the weapon spoke Lord Alfred dodged through an open doorway at the foot of the stairs.

Not an instant too soon.

With a deadly "chug" the bullet buried itself in the door-jamb.

Durg had just opened his mouth to swear roundly when a door at his elbow swung open, revealing Barbara Howland. In an instant the man had thrust his revolver out of sight and stood bowing, hat in hand.

"I beg your pardon," he said, smoothly, half-laughing. "I am sorry to have disturbed you."

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing of consequence," softly rubbing the swelling spot where the Englishman's fist had struck.

"But those words—that shot—"

"To tell the truth, Barbara, I was assaulted by a man here in the passage. He struck me and then tried to stab me with a knife. I drew a revolver and he ran. I fired a bullet over his head to hasten his flight."

"Then no one has been hurt?"

"Well, not seriously. He has left the mark of his fist here between my eyes."

"Oh, come in and let me see how badly you are hurt!"

With the utmost willingness Durg entered the room. She left the door standing wide open and motioned him to a seat near the window.

"I will get some water and bathe the bruise," she said when she had glanced at it. "It is swelling some."

With an apology for the furniture of the hotel, she brought along a tin wash-dish of water and a cheap cotton towel.

"Oh," laughed Durg, "those articles are considered luxuries here. Lots of fellows have to dip their heads in the creek and wipe on the inside of their coats in Jericho."

She began to carefully bathe his forehead in the cool water, little dreaming who was destined to witness the act. Durg made a wry face as if the swelling was very sore, but when she questioned him, declared her hands were so light and soft they could not hurt it anyway.

"I wish you might forget to speak flattery while with me," she said, with a pretty frown.

"I might do that easily enough," he laughed; "but I should have to wear a muzzle to keep me from speaking the truth."

At that moment he noticed a man slowly passing on the opposite side of the street from the hotel.

It was Goldglove Gid.

"If he would look up here now!" was the thought which flashed through Durg's brain.

As if it had been telegraphed to the man in the street, he lifted his head and gazed fairly at the window. That he saw the two figures near it was plain, for he made an involuntary halt and stood staring for an instant.

Durg was on the *qui vive*, for he more than half expected the man of the gold-colored gloves to draw a revolver and take a shot at the window. At the same time he was seized by a great fear that Barbara would see and recognize Gid.

But neither of the things he feared took place. Gid turned and walked steadily on, and Barbara was so intent in bathing the bruise that she did not glance from the window. The man of a dark record drew a breath of relief when Gid had disappeared.

"Does it hurt you so very bad?" asked Barbara, sympathetically.

"Oh, no, not so very much!" he replied. "I have received hundreds of knocks much more serious. Still it is bound to leave its mark, and I do not like that."

"You will have to pull your hat low down to conceal it."

"Which is sure to give me what is called a 'tough air.' Then I can justly lay claim to the title of Desperate Durg."

"Who was it dared attack you?"

"One who knows nothing of my record," replied Durg, with a dark smile. "Had he, he might have thought twice before he sprung upon me.—But never mind this. I have been wanting to see you to ask you some questions."

"What are they?"

The man hesitated a moment, and then said, bluntly:

"Who is that young man who returned with you from down the trail this morning?"

Barbara deliberately wiped the water from the bruise and moved away before replying. Then she simply said:

"He is a friend."

A slight frown wrinkled Durg's forehead.

"That was apparent. If he had not been a

friend, I do not fancy you would have been on such easy terms with him. But I did not know you had another friend besides myself in these parts."

"Nor did I yesterday; but last night I found one."

"Oh-oh!" and Durg started as if a new light had dawned upon him. "So that is the friend who aided you to escape from the hands of your kidnappers?"

Barbara paled and looked confused.

"I did not say so."

"No; but you left that impression. You do not deny it?"

"Am I on trial?" with a nervous laugh.

"By no means!" he hastened to say. "You need not answer my questions if you do not wish to do so. I would not ask them if I did not take such an interest in your welfare. Under the circumstances, I hope you will not consider them impertinent?"

"Oh, no! I thank you for your interest and your good-will."

"You have something more than my good-will, Barbara."

Her eyes refused to meet his.

"But I will not speak of that now," he said, after a moment of silence. "You understand my feelings, I am sure. But you need not hesitate to trust me, fearing I shall urge my claims on account of any favor rendered. I do not care to gain anything in that manner, even though my very soul may long to possess it. You have been deceived and lured into these parts by some one. I would give all I possess to know that wretch and meet him face to face on even terms!"

"You would—"

"I would do my level best to end his existence promptly so he would plot against you no more."

"I thank you, Mr. Boderick. Yesterday I thought I was friendless in this wild country. To-day my condition is changed. I hope my troubles are nearly at an end. Two friends are better than one."

"If they are true friends; but what proof have you this new-found friend will prove a true friend? You found him among evil associates—"

"You are not sure of that; I have not said so."

"Nor have you denied it."

"It makes no difference where I found him, I know I can trust him."

"Ah! He must have a great interest in you."

"He has."

"He is—"

"He is my brother."

Durg uttered a cry of amazement:

"Your brother?"

"Yes."

"But—but I thought—"

"I had no brother—I know. I thought so myself, but I was mistaken."

"Why, I cannot understand it!"

"No more could I at first."

"Your brother died in a foreign land."

"So it was supposed."

"You had proofs of his death."

"They were false proofs, for he is still alive."

"Are you certain? You have not been deceived? This man has not deluded you?"

"Not in the least. He has proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that he is my brother."

"But why has he never returned home during all these years?"

"He is proud; he had some trouble with father and ran away, so he resolved he would never go back till he was a rich man. He is still poor."

Durg was silent. Within his breast was a perfect vortex of rage and chagrin, but he said, with apparent heartiness:

"Barbara, I congratulate you. Your fortunate star is on the ascendant. I shall be most happy to meet your brother and make his acquaintance. How long will you remain in Jericho?"

"That is something I can not tell," was her truthful reply.

"Your brother must be somewhat anxious to see the old home?"

"He is."

"Now that your parents are both dead, you will still have a protector."

"Yes."

"I trust you will let me know when you contemplate leaving Jericho, for I would be pleased to accompany you as far as Pick Pocket."

"Our plans are not yet fully perfected," was Barbara's evasive reply.

"You will need a strong guard till you are quite out of this section of the country, or it will be better to leave secretly in the night. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes."

"And you have decided—"

"We have hardly decided on anything, Mr. Boderick. Perhaps I may be able to tell you more to-morrow."

"If I am not greatly mistaken," laughed Durg to himself, "your plans will be knocked to flinders to-morrow, and you will be safely in the keeping of my gallant band of Land Sharks."

He arose, saying aloud:

"I will be moving, for I have some business

to attend to. I thank you for bathing the bruise, and feel sure it will get well much quicker because of your kindness. If you should happen to wish to see me, I am easily found. Good-day."

He bowed himself out, and she bade him a pleasant good-day, closing the door behind him. As he descended the stairs, Durg muttered:

"Her brother! All the more reason why he should be promptly disposed of. What infernal evil luck threw them together at this time? The crisis of the game is about reached. All the forces are combined against me, but my hand is so hidden that they are battling against empty air. Mr. John Howland—if that is his name—shall not live to share his sister's property with me!"

And when the door was closed, Barbara turned back into the room with a strange look on her face.

"He has deceived me!" she softly exclaimed.

"The moment I saw him in the passage I noticed there was no bandage around his head, and I wondered. The blow he had just received on the forehead gave me an excuse to learn the truth. I offered to bathe the bruise, and when I was doing so I took care to learn if there were other marks of blows upon his head. There were none. It cannot be they have subsided or healed so quickly, for only this morning he wore a bandage about his head. Yes, yes! he has deceived me! There was something about his manner I did not like. He was too anxious to know all about my plans. Once more I feel sure the man is my foe."

She went to the window and watched Durg's retreating form. Her eyes finally rested on another person who was also watching the man of a dark record. She gave a great start, and a gasping exclamation escaped her lips. There was something familiar about that tall and manly figure, clad in the picturesque garb that fitted his fine form so well. She pressed her hand against her bosom, to still the tumultuous throbbing of her heart, and waited for the man to turn so she could obtain a fair view of his face.

In a moment he did so.

It was Goldglove Gid.

"Father in Heaven!" shrieked Barbara. "It is my husband!"

Then she fell to the floor in a swoon.

CHAPTER XXIV.

FACE TO FACE.

WHEN Barbara recovered, her first thought was that she had been deceived by a resemblance. As soon as she could, she looked out at the window, but Gid had departed.

"It could not have been him!" she exclaimed, wildly—"it could not! It was some one who looked like him. I obtained only a glance; then, like a foolish girl, I fainted. If I had looked more closely, it is probable the difference would have been quite apparent."

Still she walked the room, wildly wringing her hands. Her nerves had received a severe shock, and she could not readily become calm once more. She bathed her hot temples in cool water, and felt somewhat better.

"If it was— But such thoughts are foolish! He is dead! Is there a doubt about that? The man I am now unable to trust furnished me with the proofs of Gideon's death, but even he confessed the body was decomposed till it was almost beyond recognition. But the trinkets he brought me! Those were more to be trusted than his word. Yes, yes! my husband is dead!"

Still there was a lingering doubt—a hope—in her mind. The letters which had brought her into that part of the country had said Gideon Gordan was alive and leading a wild life as a gambler. True the letters were decoys, but she had seen a man who looked like her husband.

"I must see that man again. I am sure it was simply a fancied resemblance, but if I see him again it will set my mind at rest. He was tall and handsome—just like Gid—my Gid! Helos Boderick says my husband was false to me—deceived me. It is true his singular disappearance after our marriage looks black against him, but if he had plotted my ruin, why did he not carry out his purpose? Was that marriage a sham? I have never been able to learn the truth, and I fear I never shall till all things are revealed in the great Beyond. There I hope to meet Gideon Gordan face to face and learn from his lips the cause of his mysterious action."

She continued to pace the room. Several times she approached the window and gazed into the street where she had seen that tall and handsome figure, but it had disappeared.

"Why doesn't Jack come?" she murmured.

"Dear brother Jack! I am so glad to have him with me! He is all I have now, and he is so handsome and manly! To think we supposed him dead all the long years! And he was alive! Is it impossible that Gideon is alive? The very thought sets my brain afire! Oh, the mystery and bitter misery of it all!"

As Jack Howland was returning to his sister's room, he was confronted on the stairs by Daisy Wyldove.

"Oh, Jack!" she exclaimed, looking hurriedly and fearfully around. "I was just going out to look for you."

He frowned.

"For me?"

"Yes."

"I hoped you would not care to see me again."

"But I do care. I was fearfully angry at first, for you are inclined to treat me shabbily, but—"

"But you still have hopes of working the same old racket. Well, let me tell you now, it will not go. I have my eye-teeth cut."

"And I aided you to cut them," half-laughed the little actress in a mischievous manner; "for which I receive no thanks. But really, Jack—"

"Now, what is the use?" he exclaimed, almost roughly. "You should have sense enough to see it will not work. I do not care to be seen talking with you here on the stairs."

"Then come to my room."

He uttered something that sounded suspiciously like an oath.

"Well, you must think I am a clam! Do you suppose I am going to let you get your grip on me again?"

"But I have no desire to get a grip on you. I have something that is mighty important to tell you."

"I reckon I shall live just as long if I do not hear it."

"Well, there is where you make a mistake. You are not likely to live as long by several years."

"What do you mean?"

"Ah! You seem to be growing interested. Well, I have half a mind to refuse to tell you a thing unless you come to my room. I would refuse if I was sure you would come to the room, for it will be a mighty bad thing for me if a certain person sees me talking to you here. I am running fearful risks."

"Then if you have anything to say, say on and be quick about it."

"You are in great danger, Jack."

He started.

"How is that? What do you mean?"

"You have proved a traitor to some band of men."

"Gods! How do you know about that?"

"Then it is true? I see it is! Well, listen"—in a cautious whisper—"to what I tell you. You are marked for death by those men!"

Jack turned pale despite his effort at self-control.

"Who has been telling you all this?"

"One of your most bitter foes. He heard me mutter something savage about you after you gave me the cold shoulder in front of the hotel, and he improved what he thought was a good opportunity to enlist me against you. He wanted me to watch you and learn your plans, if possible."

"After which—?"

"I was to report to him. It seems there is a woman with you whom he wishes to get his clutches on."

"And you refused to aid him?"

"I am not such a big fool. No, I said he could count me in; but I made a secret resolve to warn you for old times."

"Violet—Daisy," grasping her hand, "it may be I was mistaken. I thought you one of the heartless creatures who haunt the variety stage. You have shown me you have a heart—"

"There, there! I believe you would become the same silly boy again if I gave you a chance. But I am not going to give you the chance. You are too good for me to have anything to do with, Jack; but I am not going to see you thrown cold if I can prevent it, you bet! For all of the way I used you, I did have a sneaking liking for you—and I have not gotten over it yet. But what am I talking like this for? Look out for your enemies. They think you are planning to leave town secretly to-night."

Once more Jack started and paled.

"Who is the man that told you this?" he asked. "It must be he is Barbara's secret enemy."

"Barbara?"

"My sister."

"And so it is your sister he is plotting to get his hands on? I thought perhaps it was some one else—some one other than a sister."

"But who is the man?"

"That I must refuse to tell you."

"You will not tell me who he is?"

"I dare not. I have told you enough. Look out for yourself."

With these parting words, Daisy turned and ran swiftly up the stairs, disappearing within her room. Jack followed as far as his sister's room.

As soon as Barbara's eyes rested on his face she saw something there that made her exclaim anxiously:

"What is it, Jack? What makes you look so? Has anything gone wrong? Were you unable to procure a horse?"

"I have the horse all right, but I fear we may not be able to leave Jericho to-night."

She questioned him, and he told what he had heard, filling her with the wildest alarm.

"Oh, these dreadful men!" she cried. "They will murder you! they will murder you!"

"They will if I let them; but I do not intend to let them. I must find a way of outwitting them."

For a long time the brother and sister talked and planned; but at the end of it all they had arrived at no definite determination. The future looked cloudy, indeed.

Jack had seen Little Buttercup purchasing provisions at the general store of Jericho, and he told Barbara all about her. His description was so glowing his sister declared he must surely be smitten; but Jack protested Zoe was simply a child.

Later in the day Barbara became nervous and restless and resolved to take a stroll in the open air. She felt it would be safe if she did not venture too far beyond the limits of the town. However, she resolved to walk out as far as Blind Bent's cabin and see Little Buttercup with her own eyes.

She was walking slowly along and had come in sight of the cabin when a man suddenly arose from a bowlder by the roadside and stood gazing straight at her.

It was Goldglove Gid!

They were face to face, at last!

CHAPTER XXV.

A WOMAN SCORNF.

FACE TO FACE!

Barbara stopped and stood staring at the man like a rigid statue of terror—for there was terror in her widely-opened midnight eyes.

And Gid?

What was that strangely mingled look upon his handsome face? Repulsion—scorn—contempt!

Not a word passed the lips of either for several seconds as they stood thus looking straight into each other's eyes.

What wild thoughts fled through Barbara's brain! Was this an apparition? Was it flesh and blood? Did she in truth stand face to face with the man she had so long believed dead? Or was it only a remarkable resemblance?

"No, no! it could not be a resemblance! The features were the same—the hair—the eyes—What meant that scornful light in those blue eyes?"

"Gideon!" she gasped, hoarsely. "You—you—can it be?"

He did not speak; he bowed mockingly.

"My God!" came from her lips. "Can I believe the evidence of my eyes? Speak—speak! let me hear your voice! I will not believe it is you till I have heard your voice!"

"I need no such evidence to know you!" was his cold retort.

She recoiled as if struck a blow fairly in the face, then she cried:

"Heavenly Father! it is he—alive!"

For a moment her supple body swayed as if she were about to fall, but the man made no movement toward her. In his eyes still remained that coldly repellent light. She stretched out her hands to him, sobbing brokenly:

"Oh, Gid, Gid! Thank God! thank God!"

The look of scorn deepened on his face.

"You have all the tact of a great actress!" he sneered. "Your place is on the stage."

She suddenly straightened up and looked at him as if she had received an electric shock.

"What do you mean?" came hoarsely from her lips.

"Bravo, bravo!" with mock enthusiasm and admiration. "Finely done!"

"What do you mean?" She repeated the question half-despairingly.

He flung out one yellow-gloved hand with an impulsive gesture.

"Why do you attempt to deceive me?" he demanded.

She stared speechlessly at him for a moment, then cried:

"Why did you ever deceive me?"

"Is that your little game?" with a bitter smile. "Well, I know how to meet it. It will not work with me."

She started toward him with her hands outstretched appealingly.

"Oh, Gid, Gid! do not look at me thus! It will kill me! it will kill me!"

"Back!" he cried, almost savagely, as she would have clasped her arms around his neck. "Do not touch me! You are near enough now—too near!"

He had thrust out his hand with a repelling gesture. She stopped and stared at him like one turned to stone. His eyes met her's squarely, unflinchingly. For at least half a minute they stood thus, then she caught at her throat with a gasping moan.

"I am choking—choking! Oh, God! oh, God!"

Once more she came near falling. Her eyes looked glassy and set and her lips seemed to turn purple, while she gasped for breath like a strangling person. She would have fallen had she not seen the bitter smile of scorn that curled his lips. With a mighty effort, she partially regained her composure.

"And is it thus we meet?" she muttered. "Is it thus? Oh, how terrible! It is worse than death! And he looks on me so cruelly—he is so cold! And I loved him—loved him so!"

"You are indeed a talented actress," said the wearer of the gold-colored gloves, quietly; "but don't you think it a little foolish to try any of your arts on me? I know you for just what you are."

"And at last I know you for what you are! To this hour I have hoped I was wrong. Everything looked black against you, but in the deepest recesses of my heart I forgave or excused you. Now we have met—we have looked into each other's eyes—I have been undeceived! Would to God we had never met!"

"Amen! And we never should had not fate thrown us together. I have prayed that I might never again look on your false face."

"False—false! You are the one who is false! And you stand here and accuse me of being false—you who have so cruelly—so shamefully—deceived me! Man, man! have you a heart of stone? It cannot be that you are like other human beings! I thought you dead. I would I had never known the mistake!"

"And you," he said, slowly—"you are still dead to me."

"You are worse than dead to me! Oh, God! I loved you so! There is no sign of treachery written on your face, yet how treacherous is your nature! I was an innocent, trusting girl; you came and won my love. I trusted you with life, honor, everything! I have been repaid with hours of wretchedness and despair. And now you—you who have caused all this—you meet me in such a manner!"

"By your talk one would imagine I had done some terrible thing—something unmanly. I was the one deceived! It is true I thought you all you have claimed—innocent, true-hearted. I little dreamed of your double nature! It is needless for me to tell you of your two-faced game; you know all about it. I only wonder that I was fool enough not to have seen through it sooner. I wonder I did not see through it till the proofs of your treachery were placed before my eyes."

She stared at him as if she did not understand his meaning.

"What are you saying?" she cried. "What do you mean?"

Again he flung out his hand with that impatient gesture.

"Why need we speak of these things? what good will it do?"

"We must speak of them—we must! I have found you alive after thinking you dead so long, and now I must know the truth!"

"I cannot understand how you should come to think me dead, but it would have been better had you continued to think so."

"I fear so myself! There was hope in my heart that you were true to me for all it looked so black against you. Now—merciful Heaven!—there is no hope!"

"I cannot understand why you persist in saying I was false to you. I will not ask you to explain, for without a doubt, you have a pretty little story arranged. I could not believe a word you uttered."

"If I had never believed your soft words and smooth promises, I would not be here now—I might still be a happy girl in my old home where you found me. You were a man, yet you stooped to basely deceive an innocent and trusting girl. Are you a man now that you can so boldly look me in the face with the memory of your cowardly act recalled? Till this hour I have hoped; now you have banished hope. You have scorned me! The great love which I have felt for you may turn to hatred! How can I help hating you when I see your black heart so plainly revealed?"

"That is enough!" came coldly from his lips.

"I care to listen to no more of your wild ravings. It is disgusting! You should have sense enough to see you cannot pull the wool over my eyes a second time. Do for Heaven's sake drop it! Let us part and let us pray we never meet again!"

He was turning away. Oh, the great wave that surged over her very soul! She held out her hands, crying from the depths of a broken heart:

"Oh, Gideon, my husband! do not leave me!"

He whirled like a flash.

"Your husband?" he hissed. "Dare you call me that?"

"Yes, yes!"

"What do you mean? I am nothing to you!"

"Do you deny you are my husband?"

"Deny it—ha, ha! What new tack is this you have taken?"

Her dark eyes flashed, her hands became clinched, her proud head was thrown back.

"Can it be," she cried, "that you will deny that? We were married. Whether the marriage was legal or not, I cannot say. You know we were married!"

"I know nothing of the kind! I never married you!"

Again she recoiled.

"Heavens!" she gasped, clasping her hands to her forehead. "Am I mad or dreaming?"

"That is something I cannot say, but it is plain something is the matter with you."

A choking sob came from her throat.

"Merciful Father! I wish I were dead!"

He turned away. She thrust out her hand to him once more in an imploring gesture, but, although she tried to speak, she could utter no sound. Deliberately he walked away without looking back.

It was a pitiful sight! Down upon her knees

she sunk, her hands still held out to his retreating figure, her eyes fixed imploringly on the man she had so passionately loved.

"Gid!" she cried, in a whisper, being unable to lift her voice louder. "Oh, do not leave me! Perhaps—perhaps there is—some—mistake!" The words came from her lips as if she were choking. "Come back—come back! I can—forgive—Gid, my husband, do not leave me—for the love—of Heaven! Great God! he does not hear me!"

Then she fell forward on her face. Had Goldglove Gid cast a glance backward, he would have seen a silent figure lying prone in the center of the stage-trail. But he walked onward without turning his head and disappeared.

The next Barbara knew she felt a soft hand, cool and damp, on her forehead. Before she opened her eyes she knew it was the gentle touch of one of her own sex. Little Buttercup was bathing her temples with cool water, and she uttered a little cry of joy when Barbara opened her eyes.

"Oh, you are coming round!" exclaimed the girl. "I am so glad! One time I thought sure you must be dead, for you were so white like poor mother when she died."

Barbara could not remember what had happened, and at first she felt no inclination to speak, so she closed her eyes again, allowing Zoe to continue bathing her forehead.

"Don't you feel better?" asked the little singer, anxiously.

"I—I think so."

Barbara spoke the words with difficulty.

"I reckon you will be all right soon. I saw it all."

"What has happened?"

"You met that man of the gold-colored gloves and—"

"I remember—great heavens! I remember!"

She started up and gazed wildly around.

"Has he gone?"

"Yes, he walked away and left you lying here."

"Yes—yes! He left me! I tried to call him back, but I could not make him hear."

"You know him, miss?"

"Yes."

"He is a bad man."

"Bad! How do you know? Why do you say that? How dare you say anything against him?"

Zoe started back, for Barbara's eyes were glaring fiercely at her.

"I—I have heard he is bad," she stammered.

"I fear you have heard aright. Forgive me; I did not mean to frighten you. You saw us here?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear our talk?"

"No; I was too far away. I did not venture to approach till he was gone and I saw you fall down here. When I reached you I found you had fainted, and I hurried to the house and brought this water."

"You are a good girl. You are the one we heard singing this morning, and your face is as sweet as your voice. My brother was not mistaken. But I must arise."

"Where would you go, miss?"

"I shall follow that man. He has spoken words of which I must know the meaning. I will confront him and force the truth from his lips!"

A look of fear came over Little Buttercup's face.

"Oh, you must not! I am sure he will hurt you! Mr. Durgan is to be trusted, but this man is bad."

"Mr. Durgan? What do you know of him?"

"Oh, he is a friend to me, but I have been told this man of the yellow gloves is plotting to injure me."

Barbara put her hand to her head.

"Helos Boderick was right, after all," she muttered. "He said this man was a villain. I did not believe him then, but it is plain he told the truth. Perhaps he is the only true friend I have besides brother Jack. It must be I have misjudged him. Oh I know not what to think! Everything seems in a jumble. I know not which way to turn. God help me!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

GID TAKES A SNAP SHOT.

NIGHT again.

In vain had Jack Howland searched through and around Jericho for Goldglove Gid. Jack's blood was boiling with indignation, for his sister had told him all about her meeting with the man of the gold-colored gloves and what passed between them. Of course it became necessary for her to explain her relations with the man who had scorned her, and so Jack learned all about the secret marriage and the misery it had caused. Filled with rage, he swore that Gideon Gordan should face his sister and ask her pardon—should beg for his life at her feet—or he would kill him like a dog.

But Jack little knew the man he had to deal with.

He had also decided it would be worse than rashness for him to attempt to leave town that night. The trails would in all probability be closely guarded by his old comrades, and he

would simply walk straight into their death-dealing hands. Thus he would lose his own life and his sister would again fall into the power of the foe who was plotting against her.

And who was his sister's foe?

The question had barely passed through his head when it was followed by an answer.

Goldglove Gid!

Who else could it be? It was a natural conclusion that the man who had so bitterly wronged her in the past was still working against her.

"He shall die!" hissed Jack, savagely.

He did not tell Barbara of his resolve to end Gid's life, but he went forth on the "war-path" prepared for red work.

But Gid was not readily found.

Neither did Desperate Durg appear upon the streets of Jericho during the remainder of the day.

There was a lull before the storm, but the storm was surely approaching.

During the evening Jack made his way into the Metropolitan Saloon. Almost the first thing that attracted his attention when he had passed through the doorway was the excited voice of Lord Alfred Dunly.

"Hi ham not a man to be himposed hupon with himpunity!" cried the fat Englishman, who was surrounded by a crowd that had a threatening aspect. "Hi 'ave a few rights heven in this bloomin' bloody country."

"Do ye still say Daisy Wyllove is your wife?" demanded a savage voice.

"That is none hof your hinfurnal business!" gurgled Lord Alfred.

"Oh, it haint, eh? Cl'ar ther way, pards, an let me git at that Johnny Bull."

"Stand hoff!" squawked Milord, trying to look very ugly. "You will find me a very 'ard man to crowd."

At this the throng broke into a very coarse laugh.

"I think we'd best hang ther derved Englisher, anyway," said one.

"Hit will be a serious thing for you bif you do!" declared Lord Alfred.

"I rayther reckon it'll be seri's fer you," shouted a laughing voice.

"But how about this gal?" demanded another. "We want ter know if she is really your wife."

"An' ef you don't tell ther truth, we'll fill your hide full o' lead!"

"And then hang you to the nearest tree!"

"Thet's ther kind o' er croud you've tumbled inter, so spit it out."

"Hi protest!" gurgled the Englishman, smiting a fat fist into an open hand—"Hi protest hin the name hof the Queen!"

"Protest an' be—jiggered!"

"Somebody tetch him up with er knife."

"Guv 'im ther taste o' er sticker!"

Ginger succeeded in forcing his way to his master's side.

"Fo' de good Lawd's sakes, milawd, w'at yo' in heyer fer?" he said, excitedly. "Is yo' done turned fool? Dey kem mighty nigh hangin' yo' ter a tree las' night, an' I jest 'low yo'r goose is done gone coked now. Dis nig'll nebber set eyes on dat little bill yo' owe him."

A cocked revolver was thrust under Lord Alfred's nose.

"Jest see ef you know how ter answer perlite questions," said the owner of the weapon.

Milord turned pale.

"Be careful!" he cried. "Is that—er—er—thing loaded?"

"I sh'ud say it wuz, an' it's loaded pritty nigh chock ter ther muzzle too."

"Hit may go hoff!"

"You are kerrect, an' if it do, ther hull roof o' yer head'll go off too."

"Wh—what can Hi do for you, sir?"

"Answer ther question you hev bin ast—ls thet gal your wife?"

"Hi must hadmit she is not," replied the frightened man, with apparent reluctance. "Hi was deceived by a most remarkable resemblance. Hi never saw the young lady before."

A shout of satisfaction went up from the crowd.

"I knowed it!" yelled a stentorian voice. "Our Daisy hain't hitched in no double harness yit—but she w'ud be derved quick ef she'd only say 'yes' w'en I ast her."

"W'at'll we do with ther Johnny Bull?"

"Hain't you better let him go now, boys?"

The quiet voice attracted the attention of every one in the vicinity. The speaker was Goldglove Gid, who had suddenly appeared on the scene.

"That is my man, for a thousand!" muttered Jack, dropping his hand into a convenient pocket and making sure he had a revolver ready for instant use.

"Now he shall eat his words—and die!"

Straight toward the wearer of the gold-colored gloves he made his way, and was soon confronting Gid.

"You are the very man I have been looking for," he said, with forced coolness.

"Ah!" and Gid bowed, politely. "You are in luck then, for you have found me."

"You are Gideon Gordan?"

"That is my name, but—I fear I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance."

"My name is Howland."

Gid could not repress a slight start.

"Howland, eh?" looking Jack sharply in the face. "That is a name I have often heard."

A sudden thought flashed through Jack's brain. He would not drag his sister's name into the affair at all, but would pick a quarrel with the man on account of the old family feud.

"Yes," he said, sternly, "there is a standing feud between our families."

"You are—"

"I am John Howland."

"But I thought John Howland died in Australia?"

"It was a mistake; he is here."

"Well?"

"He is here to wipe out the old score."

"That is folly. Your father is dead; my father is dead. Let the old troubles rest in the grave."

"But you are alive and I am alive. The feud is not yet settled."

"And you demand—"

"Satisfaction!"

The spectators fell back. They understood there was hot work to follow.

A hard look passed over Goldglove Gid's face, then a strange light flashed in his eyes.

Like magic a revolver leaped into his hand, and, without a word of warning, he fired with the muzzle almost touching Jack Howland's face!

CHAPTER XXVII.

A TRUCE FOR A TIME.

THE action of the man of the gold-colored gloves had been so swift that Jack Howland was not able to get out his own weapon first, even though he had been looking out for a treacherous move; but as he reeled back with the flash of Gid's shot almost scorching his face, he snatched out his revolver, crying hoarsely:

"You devil!"

Blindly he threw up his hand, resolved to avenge himself before he fell. But Goldglove Gid had no thought of being shot down in such a manner.

"Hold, you fool!" he cried, leaping toward young Howland.

His head was clear, his eyes quick, his hands sure. He caught Jack's hand and thrust it upward just as the revolver was discharged.

Not an instant too soon!

The bullet passed through his hat!

"Hands off!" shouted Jack. "Give me a fair show and I will have your heart's blood!"

"But I haven't any of that kind of blood to spare this evening," was Gid's retort. "I need it all to attend to my regular business with. You will excuse me if I appropriate this toy."

With a skillful wrench he tore the revolver from the hand of the excited young man.

"Now go a little slow, I pray you!" came sharply from his mustache-shaded lips. "Is this the way you use a man who has just saved your life?"

"Saved my life? You wretch! you tried to take me at an advantage and shoot me down like a dog! It was a treacherous move well worthy of its author."

"Think you so? Just listen an instant and observe the musical sounds that will fall upon your ear."

"Oh—Wow—wow!" howled some one behind Jack.

"I am not to be caught by such a trick," declared the ex-bandit. "You do not get me to turn and give you a good chance to finish your work."

"Is that the way you look at it?"

"Yes."

"And do you think I am chump enough to miss you at two paces?"

"You *did* miss me."

"Had I fired at you and missed you at that distance, I would send the next bullet into my own brains. I should have no desire to live after that."

"But—"

"But I did not fire at you at all. I fired over your shoulder."

Jack looked incredulous.

"For what reason?"

"If you will look round you will see. Had I not fired as I did you would now be lying on the floor here with a knife in your back."

"It's true, pard," declared Old Plug Ugly, pushing his way forward—"true ez Gospel. I saw ther derved p'izen imp jest ez ther gent o' ther gold gloves fired, but I'd 'n' bin too late ter stopped ther critter from usin' his knife. Gid hes saved yer life."

Jack looked Gordan fairly in the face, and Gid's eyes met his squarely. There was no sign of hatred or treachery in the blue orbs of the goldglove exquisite. With a bow, Gid handed back young Howland's weapon, saying:

"I have no use for this, but if you do not find a man behind you with a broken wrist, I hope you will use it on me—and use it effectively."

Jack accepted the weapon and turned around. Had he waited longer, he would not have seen the man who had tried to take his life, for the wretch was sneaking away, clinging to his bullet-shattered hand; but his knife still quivered in the floor, where it had fallen, striking point

first, and there were blood-stains which told that Gid's bullet had not been wasted.

But the would-be assassin was not to escape so easily.

"Shoot ther cuss!"

"Lynch him!"

"Give him a greased neck-tie!"

"Hooray fer ther limb of a tree!"

"Stop him! He's takin' er sneak!"

The cries came from the crowd and they began to surge around the unlucky wretch. It looked as if his minutes were numbered. He turned pale and looked around wildly for assistance.

Desperate Durg was in the saloon and had been a witness of everything that passed. He swore roundly but softly when he saw one of the band spring out and attempt to stab Jack in the back.

"The blazing fool! If he'd wait, those two would chew each other up and save us the trouble of disposing of— Hal! Gods!"

The exclamations were wrung from his lips as he witnessed Goldglove Gid's shot and its result.

"Now Satan will be to pay!" he snarled.

"Two to one Guff is shot on the spot or lynched by the gang!"

The crowd gathered around the unlucky desperado, who, with a hunted look in his eyes, tried to fight his way to freedom.

"Stand off, dern ye!" he hoarsely yelled. "It wuz an ole score!"

"Make him talk!" exclaimed one of the throng. "Wring the truth from his lips!"

"Shame, shame!" shouted another. "The man is bleeding! Where is the doctor?"

"Make him tell w'at he tried ter stick t'other feller fer. Pr'aps he won't need no doctor."

"It wuz an ole score, I tell ye!" again asserted the wounded man. "Thet cuss killed my pard in cold blood fer ther belt of dust he wore."

"And you were in for avenging your pard?"

"Yep."

"But w'y didn't ye do it squar' like er man, not try ter knife him in ther back?"

"Cause he's er reg'ler devil. He's more'n a match fer three common men."

"And you—"

"I had no desire ter pass in my chips. He murdered my pard—struck him in ther back with er knife. I reckoned it wuzn't no more'n fair ter serve him ther same."

An uncertain murmur ran over the throng.

"Is this true?" asked one, of Jack.

"It is as big a lie as ever was invented," was the reply.

"Ther feller he tried ter knife sez it's er lie."

"Course he'll say so, but—"

The wounded man's words were drowned in a terrible roar.

"Ter ther gallows-tree!"

In another instant the unfortunate rascal would have been swept from the saloon by the excited crowd, but at this juncture Desperate Durg stepped in.

"Hold on!" he cried, commandingly. "You are carrying this thing along altogether too fast, pards."

"It's Durg!"

"Chain up!"

"Listen ter w'at he says!"

"This is simply a case of one man's word against another's," said Durg, quietly but distinctly. "Why should you believe one quicker than the other?"

That was a question not easily answered.

"This man is wounded—is bleeding badly," continued Durg. "Our best plan is to see that his injury is attended to, and then we can inquire into this affair more closely. If the person he attempted to stab did actually murder his pard, then the murderer is the one who should hang, not this unfortunate man who attempted to do the work of the avenger."

It was plain his words produced an effect.

But at this moment Goldglove Gid stepped to Durg's side.

"Gentlemen," and the Man of Grit allowed his eyes to run swiftly over the faces of the crowd, "this is no lynching matter. There has been no one killed. I had the pleasure of nipping the killing process in the bud. If this man had stolen a horse, I would not think of trying to prevent you from hanging him up to dry; but as it is, I think we had better make sure we are right before we go ahead. The man needs a doctor. Is there one in the room?"

There was not.

"Then will some one go for one and he lively."

As Gid stepped to his side, Durg had favored him with a single look of amazement. He was surprised that the wearer of the gold-colored gloves should stand in with him in favor of the very man he had barely prevented from committing murder most foul. But when he saw Gid was in earnest he felt Guff was safe for the time, at least; and he turned his attention to the unlucky avenger's shattered hand.

"Let me bind this handkerchief around your wrist to keep the blood back," said he, producing a spotless handkerchief and quickly twisting it into the semblance of a cord.

The man made no objections, and so Durg bound it tightly about his wrist. Then he drew his revolver, thrust the barrel through a loop in the handkerchief and began to twist it, thus making

it hug still more tightly about the bleeding limb. In this manner the loss of blood was in a great measure retarded. While Durg was doing this their eyes met and a significant look passed between them.

It was not long before a doctor appeared.

By that time the crowd had cooled down and seemed willing to let the matter rest for the time. Seeing this, Gid turned away and approached Jack Howland.

"Now," said he, quietly, "that matter is settled for the present, I suppose you will still demand satisfaction?"

For several moments Jack was silent, staring straight at the strange man who had saved his life. Then a bitter exclamation fell from his lips.

"That you," he cried—"you, of all men, should do this and place me in such a position!"

"I fear I do not understand you."

"I am indebted to you for my life."

Gid bowed.

"That is quite true."

"How can I meet you now in a deadly encounter and take your life?"

"If you demand such an encounter, you can meet me any way you choose."

"But how can I demand it?"

"I fear I do not fully understand you."

"I owe you my life; until the debt is squared I cannot meet you."

"Is that the way you look at it?"

"It is."

"Then you do not wish to press the affair now?"

"No."

"I am sincerely glad, for I have no desire to make your sister brotherless. I should have done my level best to avoid the encounter anyway."

"But you cannot avoid it! The time will come when you will be forced to meet me face to face!"

"And that will be—"

"When I have squared the score by saving your life."

"Such an opportunity may never come."

"It must!"

"I hope it never will."

"Fate will not let you escape me in the end."

"But the old feud is not your true reason for wishing to meet me in a duel?"

"No."

"I knew it was not."

Jack smiled bitterly.

"Of course you knew! We were the center of observation, and I had no desire of mentioning my sister's name before that crowd."

"So you have imagined it was your duty to kill me for your sister's sake?"

"To avenge her wrongs!" savagely.

A strange light shone in Gid's eyes and a hard look settled on his handsome face.

"Her wrongs!" he repeated, bitterly. "As if she were the one wronged! But you are her brother; you have heard her story. I do not blame you."

"How kind!" sneered Jack. "You may think because I do not choose to end the matter now I never shall; but if you do think so, you are greatly in error. The day is coming when we shall stand face to face on even terms and one will fall to rise no more."

"Until then—what?"

"Let it be a truce. We will be as strangers."

Gid bowed, gravely.

"It shall be as you wish, and I hope the time may never come that we shall fight a duel, for I should have to kill you or cripple you for life to save myself."

Then they parted.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A TREACHEROUS SHOT.

THE tinkle of a bell sounded through the saloon, and in a moment every face was turned toward the curtained stage.

Daisy was about to make her first appearance for the evening.

Again the bell tinkled softly, and then the curtain was rolled up. A moment later the little actress appeared in her usual stage costume.

Lightly she tripped down to the front of the stage, bowing and smiling in acknowledgment of the round of applause with which she was greeted. Then she sang a "catchy" topical song, with a rather jerky violin accompaniment, and retreated into the wings.

She was quickly recalled.

Again she sang, and added variety by dancing and kicking that set the spectators wild. She disappeared, but the applause did not cease until she came on again.

Old Plug Ugly had made his way to Goldglove Gid's side.

"She's purty good," nodded the old man, "she's purty good in her line. She's got an A 1 figger, and she kin hop an' frisk roun' ter beat ther Dutch, but w'en it comes ter singing, she bain't nowhar with Leetle Buttercup—eh, pard?"

"I will allow you are right," said Gid. "This young woman would be a great card with a common variety show, but there is nothing that could be called art in either her singing or dancing."

"She's purty good," nodded the old man, "she's purty good in her line. She's got an A 1 figger, and she kin hop an' frisk roun' ter beat ther Dutch, but w'en it comes ter singing, she bain't nowhar with Leetle Buttercup—eh, pard?"

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"I will allow you are right," said Gid. "This young woman would be a great card with a common variety show, but there is nothing that could be called art in either her singing or dancing."

Daisy again tripped down to the front of the stage, bowing and smiling in her most bewitching manner.

"Gentlemen," she cried, "I have a new song of my own composing, which I will sing to you to-night. It is entitled: 'That Henglish Lord.'"

A whoop of delight broke from the crowd, and when the excitement had subsided, Daisy began her song.

It ran as follows:

"I once did know an Englishman
Who came to Jericho,
And swelled around as if he owned
The world—or more—as you know.
He called himself a 'Henglish Lord';
No one believed the lie.
A bogus cove he was, by Jove!
And so the boys did cry:

"Shoot him! shoot him! we do not want him here!
Lynch him! lynch him! his game is very clear;
And for his life he quick must flee,
Or we will hang him on a tree!"

"This Englishman so corpulent
He stood and winked at me,
And then he cried—the crafty wretch!—
'This is my wife I see!'
But I declare upon my life
He told a wicked lie;
This 'Henglish Lord' he is a fraud,
And this is what I cry:

"Shoot him! shoot him! I do not want him here!
Lynch him! lynch him! his game is very clear;
I do not want him troubling me,
I wish you'd hang him on a tree!"

At the conclusion of the song the listeners fairly went wild with delight. So great was their enthusiasm that Daisy was forced to appear on the stage three times and bow her acknowledgment. Then the curtain fell.

Lord Alfred was in the saloon and his face had literally turned black with rage. Once more he climbed into a chair and from that to the top of a table, where he stood choking and gurgling with fury. At length he gained control of himself enough to squawk:

"This is an insult—a bloody hinsult! Hi ham a man hof honor hand Hi can prove Hi ham a Henglish Lord! Hi 'ave hagreed not to henforce my claim on that woman, but Hi'll be jammed hif Hi can stand this! She says she never saw me before, but Hi can prove—"

"Get down!"

"Shut up!"

"Shoot him! shoot him!"

"Lynch him! lynch him!"

"Oh, for a rotten egg!"

Then the table was overturned and Lord Alfred once more fell into violent hands to be hustled unceremoniously toward the door.

"Let 'em go with ther derned fool!" exclaimed Old Plug Ugly. "I don't reckon they'll hurt him very bad, an' I'm derned ef he don't need a lesson bad! He's ther blamedest blockhead I never did see! W'at's he back in hyer fer anyhow?"

But Gid determined to make sure Lord Alfred was not fatally injured by the excited mob, so he followed them to the door. Outside milord was released and told he would be given just one minute to get out of pistol-range. He decided to use his short legs to advantage and the way he skurried down the moon-lighted street was amusing to witness. To hasten him along, some of the crowd fired their revolvers in the air. But there was one who took deliberate aim at the vanishing figure and would have dropped the Englishman with a bullet if Goldglove Gid had not struck the fellow's arm a blow with his clinched hand, breaking it just above the elbow.

The man uttered a cry of pain, the revolver being hurled from his fingers.

"You devil!" he groaned. "You have broken my arm!"

"That was what I intended to do," was Gid's cool reply. "You were going to shoot that unlucky Englishman."

"Well, what business wuz it to you if I wuz?"

"The business of a man who will prevent a dastardly murder whenever he can."

"Perhaps I wuz only goin' to send a bullet whistling past his head."

"It is too late for you to make that claim now. You have the same as acknowledged you intended to drop him if you could. My advice is that you go have that arm set and keep out of my way afterward."

The fellow picked up his revolver with the hand of his uninjured arm and slunk away, uttering savage threats.

"Waal, I'm derned ef you didn't do thet slick!" exclaimed Old Plug Ugly, in admiration. "You seem ter be er kinder derned handy sort o' a galoot, an' I'll 'low you're a good man ter tie to."

Gid smiled, but made no reply.

Within the saloon they came face to face with Desperate Durg. Gid halted directly in the man's path.

"Hold on a moment, Boderick," he said, grimly.

Durg flashed him a look full of vindictive hate.

"What do you want with me?" he demanded, savagely.

"I believe there is an old score between us."

"Waal!"

"Don't you think it is a good time to settle it?"

"I have nothing to settle with you."

"I am aware of that. It is I who have something to settle with you."

"Stand aside and let me pass!"

"Nary stand! I mean business."

"You fool!" hissed Durg, lowering his voice and glaring fiercely into Gid's eyes. "I am on my own stamping-ground, and my friends are all around me. If I wanted you shot down at this instant, all I need do is give the signal and you would fall with a half-dozen bullets in your body. You had better get out of my way."

"Do you think you can frighten me in such a manner?" came scornfully from the lips of the Man of Grit. "I am not in the least afraid of your hidden assassins. It is like you to have such cowardly tools to do the work you dare not do yourself."

Durg's face flushed with anger.

"Oh, your day is coming!" he gritted, fairly atremble with the fierceness of his passion. "You have not long to live."

"Think you so? Well, I do not mean that you shall outlive me. You have got to meet me now in a fair combat to the death."

With these words, he drew a revolver and cocked it.

"Draw!" he cried, falling back a step.

"With you holding the drop? No, thank you! Besides that, I am not going to fight a duel with the muzzles of the weapons touching. Stand back!"

At the command, he threw his hand upward with a singular gesture.

Somewhere outside the building sounded the report of a revolver, followed by the click of broken glass as the bullet passed through a window.

Then Goldglove Gid uttered a groan and sunk slowly down upon the floor!

CHAPTER XXIX.

MORE OF THE DASTARD'S WORK.

DESPERATE DURG instantly left the room, while Old Plug Ugly sprang forward with a cry of horror and rage and knelt by the side of the fallen man.

"Are ye socked, pard?" he asked, anxiously. "Whar are ye hit? How bad is it? Let me see."

"Yes, I am hit," replied Gid, grimly; "but I don't know as it is very bad. It is somewhere in the neighborhood of my heart, for it made me feel so weak I could not stand; but, I am all right now," and the Man of Grit arose to his feet.

An investigation revealed the fact that a bullet had struck exactly over his heart, but was imbedded in a gold locket Gid had worn there.

The locket had saved his life.

"Ther p'izen cuss meant ter do ye, pard," observed Plug Ugly, gazing at the shattered locket Gid held in his hand. "It wuz lucky that wuz thar ter stop ther ball."

"But it is ruined!" exclaimed the Man of Grit, with a mingling of regret and savageness in his voice. "I would not have taken thousands for it! It was—her—picture—there." Then, suddenly glaring around, he cried: "I will give a hundred dollars to stand face to face with the man who fired that shot!"

A dozen men instantly darted out at the door to look for the cowardly wretch who had fired the treacherous shot, Old Plug Ugly being among the foremost. Gid followed them.

But the search was useless. The would-be murderer had made good his escape, and the search was abandoned as fruitless.

"This wuz some o' Durg's work," observed Old Plug Ugly, as he was returning to the saloon with Gid.

"Without a doubt."

"Yep, shore ez shootin'. He slid out ez soon's you drapped."

"We shall meet again."

"But look out fer him, pard. He's a bad, bad man, an' this piece o' work shows he's got plenty o' pals ter do his dirty work. I reckon you an' him hes met afore this?"

"We have."

"An' ye don't love each other to speak on?"

"No."

"Waal, Desperate Durg hes a mighty tight grip on Jericho, but allee samee I kinder take ter your style an' I'm reddy ter sw'ar by you ag'in' him. If I kin ever be of any aid ter you, jest call on me."

"Many thanks, old man; your friendship is appreciated. I may need all the friends I can find here, for I have made a resolve to lay this so-called Desperate Durg in the dust or make him get out of this town. I owe him a big score, for I confess with shame that he once pulled the wool over my eyes in great shape. I thought him a friend then, but he proved to be a most treacherous enemy. I would have had his life, but I was flat on my back and could not meet him. When I recovered he was gone. I did not follow him for reasons of my own, and I prayed he would never cross my path; but fate

has thrown us together again. I have tried to restrain myself, but as I see him from time to time, it becomes more and more impossible for me to do so."

They passed into the saloon together and sat down at a table, where the conversation was continued.

"Has this Desperate Durg a wife in town?" asked Gid.

"Waal, I guess not!" was the old man's reply.

"Leastways, I never knew o' his hev'in' one."

A look of perplexity passed across Gid's face.

"But there is a young woman stopping at the hotel and he is on familiar terms with her."

"I reckon you must mean leetle Daisy, ther singer as gives us ther racket every night!"

"No, it is another."

"Ernother! Great fish-hooks! I didn't know thar wuz ernother female stoppin' at ther hotel."

"There is."

"An' Durg's on familiar terms with her?"

"It looks that way."

"Waal, he's thet kind o' er critter, you bet! Ef thar's er female as he kin git on familiar terms with, he'll git thar! He's got ther cut o' er ladies' man."

Gid scowled a bit and drummed on the table.

"I'll 'low he's got his eyes on Leetle Buttercup," nodded Old Plug Ugly. "It strikes me he means ter scoop her in."

"And she is but a child."

"Skeersely more."

"He deserves hanging if he tampers with her!"

"Ye'r right, pard, an' I'd like ther privilege o' pullin' at ther rope."

Gid was silent a moment, then he said:

"I have thought that he meant the child harm, and that is one reason why I have resolved to drive the man out of this town. If she is where he cannot see her, he will be unable to carry out his foul plots."

"That's kereck."

"And if he succeeds before I am able to run him out—if he succeeds in harming that innocent girl, I will have his heart's blood anyway! I will avenge her, if I have to follow him to the lower regions of the Bottomless Pit!"

He did not utter the words in a loud or boastful tone, but there was something fearfully impressive about the manner in which he spoke them. It was plain he meant exactly what he said. Little did he dream how soon he would find it his duty to take the trail of Little Buttercup's kidnappers.

A little more than an hour had passed since Daisy sung in the saloon. Suddenly the door was thrust open and a man staggered in, uttering a wild cry.

It was Blind Bent!

"Zoe! Zoe!" he called, stretching out his arms in a pitifully helpless manner. "Zoe, my darling, are you here?"

The cry attracted the attention of every one within the place. Once more the blind man uttered the call, and a great hush fell upon the boisterous throng.

"Great God!" he groaned, clasping one hand over his sightless eyes and clutching wildly at the empty air with the other, at the same time reeling back against the wall. "She does not answer! She is not here! Oh, if I could only see!"

Then he started forward, hoarsely exclaiming:

"There are men here! I know it—I can feel them, even though I cannot see. Tell me—speak—have you seen my child, my little Zoe? She is gone—gone from her bed! Have you seen her? Has she been here?"

One rough fellow replied, with an evident effort:

"She hain't b'in in hyer, pard, not this evenin'."

Bent flung up both hands with another bitter cry that seemed to be wrung from the depths of his heart.

"That devil—he has lured her away! I cannot follow them, for I am blind, blind, blind! God in Heaven! what can I do? what can I do?"

Old Plug Ugly clutched Gid's arm.

"Ther devil's ter pay, pard!" he gritted. "I reckon thar's work on hand."

The Man of Grit sprang to his feet and hurried to Blind Bent's side, catching the excited man by the shoulder.

"What is this you say?" he demanded, somewhat harshly. "Your child is gone?"

"Yes, yes—gone, gone!"

"But you may be needlessly alarmed, man. Remember you were once to-day. She may be about the cabin."

"No, no—I tell you she is gone!"

"When did you discover this?"

"Only a short time ago. Oh, my child! my child! That man has led you—"

"Never mind that now," commanded Gid, sharply. "Tell us the truth about her disappearance. She was with you—"

"She was with me all the evening, and she went to bed as usual. I did not remain up long after she was asleep—I thought she was asleep. I lay down and slept, but I dreamed—I dreamed my darling was being carried from me! I thought she stretched out her arms and called to me! I tried to save her, for I could see in my

dream. I can always see in my dreams. But I could not stir—I was bound hand and foot by some horrible spell! I struggled with all my strength—I groaned—I cursed—I prayed! Still they were bearing her from me! Suddenly I awoke. It was all a dream, but her cries were ringing in my ears, and I remember the look of supplication I had seen on her face as she was borne away. I was covered with a cold perspiration. With my heart standing still, I sprang out of bed and hurried to the door of her room. It was standing partially open, and I listened for the regular breathing that would tell me she was still there—safe. Still—still—a horrible stillness! I made my way to the bed, as I had done once before to-day. She was not on it! I called her. No voice replied! I rushed to the door. It was unfastened! She was gone—gone out into the night! and I was there alone—alone!"

It would be impossible to picture the dramatic force with which the blind man told this story. Every sound save his thrilling voice was hushed. Many a man's blood was stirred by Tom Bent's words.

"And when you found she was not in the cabin, what did you do?" asked Goldglove Gid.

"I called to her outside the door. The wild shriek of a night-bird was my only reply."

"Then—"

"Then I found my way here. I ran—I stumbled—I fell; then I got up and ran on again! I hoped against hope I should find her here. But now I know the worst has happened. I cannot see! How am I to find my child? how am I to wreak vengeance on the wretch who has lured her from me? My God, men! think of my position! In the name of Heaven, I ask you to aid me! Will you help a poor blind man find the only being in all this wide world he has to love, and to keep him from taking his own wretched life?"

There was a murmur—it swelled louder—it became one great shout:

"We will!"

The very depths of those rude men's hearts had been reached and stirred. All the nobility in their natures had been aroused, and at the same time their fiercest wrath against the one who had planned the dastardly work was fanned into a flame. Woe to him if he fell into their hands! With a rope and the limb of a tree they would quickly avenge the wrongs of the blind man and his child.

As if with one general impulse, the crowd poured out of the saloon and started for Blind Bent's cabin. Goldglove Gid and Old Plug Ugly aided Bent to keep up with the rush. Jack Howland was with the very foremost.

In a short time the cabin was reached and a portion of the crowd poured into it, before Gid could close the door and put Old Plug Ugly on guard. Jack Howland was one of those who had entered.

A light was produced and investigations were begun. It was not long before Jack uttered a cry.

Beneath a partially open window, as if it had been cast in at the opening, he found a slip of paper.

"What is it?" eagerly asked several voices.

"A note," he replied. "There is writing on it."

"Read it!"

But Jack shook his head and looked sadly at Bent, who was listening eagerly to everything. Gid understood and held out his hand for the paper. Jack gave it to him without a word. There was scarcely more than a line on it, and it ran as follows:

"Forgive me, dear daddy, for I will come back to you when I am a great singer, as he has promised I shall be some day. Zoe."

The writing was plainly that of a female.

"Read it! read it!" cried Bent, excitedly.

"Why do you try to keep anything from me? I must know all—all!"

Gid saw he was not to be deceived, so without further hesitation, he read the brief message aloud.

Then Blind Bent threw up his arms with the cry of a heart-broken man and fell heavily to the floor.

Tenderly Goldglove and Jack lifted him and bore him to the bunk. He was not unconscious, but he moaned like a strong man in the greatest pain. A hard and bitter look made the features of the two men rigid. They looked into each other's eyes and saw a stern resolve there. For the time their enmity was forgotten.

"The black-hearted devil!" muttered Jack.

Gid heard him, understood, nodded grimly.

"Perhaps we may be able to save her yet," ventured young Howland.

"I hope we may, but I fear—I fear."

Then the Man of Grit bent over the moaning father, saying earnestly:

"Listen, man. My name is Gideon Gordan, and as Goldglove Gid I have a reputation. I am a man who never breaks his word. I swear to you by high Heaven if your child is living I will find her and restore her to your arms."

"And I am with you to the end," declared Jack.

CHAPTER XXX.

WORK OF THE LAND SHARKS.

In truth the two men were enemies, yet for the time it seemed as if they were friends. Their eyes met as they stood beside the couch of the moaning man and that glance seemed to tell them each was in deadly earnest and would bend every energy to perform the task they had sworn to accomplish. At that moment each recognized the manhood of the other.

Goldglove Gid turned to Old Plug Ugly, saying:

"Tell them outside what has happened. Let them know we have found positive proof the poor girl has been lured away."

The old man instantly unbarred the door and stepped out to obey. The cry of rage that came from the throng told how the information was received.

"Now," said Gid, "it is our duty to provide at least one weather for this unfortunate man, for there is no telling what he would do if left alone."

One of the men who had entered the cabin volunteered to look after Bent till morning, and another said he would relieve him then.

This having been arranged, Gid requested the greater part of them to leave the cabin, as he wished to question the grief-stricken father. When they had filed out, he sat down on the bunk by Bent's side and spoke sharply:

"See here, man, you must brace up and give us some points if you expect us to save your child."

"Too late!" moaned the poor wretch. "You can do nothing now! It is too late!"

"We are not so sure of that. There may be plenty of time to save her if you will come to your senses and tell us all we want to know."

The blind man tried to shake off the spell that was on him and succeeded in a measure.

"What can I tell you?" he asked.

"First, we want to know whom you suspect of having lured your child away."

Bent started up on the bunk, shaking his clinched fist in the air, as he cried:

"It was that infernal villain who came home with her last night! I am sure it was he!"

"What makes you think so?"

"This note says she has gone away to become a great singer. She told me last night he had been praising her voice and telling her she might make lots of money on the stage."

"She told you his name?"

"Yes."

"It is—?"

"Durgan—that is the vile wretch!"

"Jest ez I said!" nodded Old Plug Ugly.

"Ther p'izen critter has played his little game!"

A deadly look flashed from Gid's blue eyes.

"He shall be called to an account!" exclaimed the Man of Grit. "He shall stand face to face with this wronged man!"

Bent clutched eagerly at Goldglove's arm.

"That's all I ask!" he cried, hoarsely. "Let me get my hands at his throat and I will never take them away till he is dead! I will strangle the life from his miserable body!"

"Have you any absolute proof he lured your child away?"

"I have not, but still I am sure it was he! He filled her head with foolish notions! Oh, Zoe, Zoe! my little Zoe! It is more bitter than death to lose you in this way! And you said you would never, never leave your poor old blind daddy! You meant it then—I know you meant it then! But he filled your head with more of his lies—he enticed you from me! Curse him! curse him! curse him!"

He flung up his hands with a wild shriek and fell back upon the bunk, muttering and moaning.

"We can learn nothing more from him," said Goldglove Gid, arising. "I allowed you men to remain for a special purpose. I think every man within this room is to be trusted. Among those I asked to go out were, without doubt, many of this Desperate Durg's friends. I did not wish them to hear this unhappy father openly accuse the man who had been something of a magnate in Jericho. It may not be too late to catch this man before he is quite aware suspicion has fallen on him. It is the duty of every man here to keep silent and work swiftly. Find this Durg and hold him. If he is innocent, it will not be difficult for him to prove it; if he is guilty—Well, there is time enough to talk about that."

Within Gid's heart was a feeling of savage joy, for he saw a net was closing around his bitter enemy—a net from which there could be no escape. The day of Desperate Durg's reign in Jericho was past.

The door was opened and they filed out of the cabin, leaving Blind Bent and the man who was to watch over him. It was a wild mob that had gathered around the cabin. Gid's appearance was hailed by exclamations and questions. They were beginning to look on the Man of Grit as a leader.

But Goldglove made very little talk save to tell them there was work on hand and bidding them do their best to ferret out the truth. In the morning, he said, he hoped they would be able to take the trail of Little Buttercup and

her companion. Until that time little or much might be accomplished as fortune proved averse or favorable.

From Blind Bent's cabin Jack Howland hurried toward the hotel. He had taken a great fancy to Little Buttercup, and his heart was filled with rage against the man who had lured her into the snare. He made a resolution not to leave Jericho or the vicinity till the misguided girl was rescued or avenged.

But little did he dream of the terrible discovery awaiting him at the hotel.

Barbara was not in her room. He was surprised at making this discovery, but thought she could not be far away, and would soon return. But as he looked around, a handkerchief upon the floor attracted his attention. He picked it up and observed a peculiar odor come from it. A second whiff gave him a start, for he decided in an instant that the odor was that of chloroform!

"What does this mean?" he cried, gazing around. "What could she have used chloroform for?"

But as he spread out the handkerchief, he made still another discovery.

It was plainly a man's article!

A sudden fear seized upon him. What had happened while he was absent from his sister's side? He had hardly thought her foes would begin operations against her so soon, but—

"Great God!" he gasped. "I believe they have! She is gone! This handkerchief indicates—what?"

He again glanced around the room. Something upon the door attracted his notice. Almost at a bound he had reached the door.

A tiny dagger pinned a slip of paper to the portal, and on the paper was written:

"DEATH TO TRAITORS!"

Those three words told the story, and they wrung a great cry of rage from his lips.

The Land Sharks had been there and done their work.

"Oh, curse them!" he cried, hoarsely. "They have her again in their power! They succeeded in carrying her away in some manner without arousing or alarming any one in the house. There is more work ahead for me, for they shall know no rest till the last of that band has met his just deserts or has fled from justice. They were my pals, and for that reason I was not willing to move against them; but now I have no such scruples. They have struck at a woman—and that woman is my sister. Had they struck at me alone, I never would have led a band of men against them, or betrayed their secrets. Now I shall not delay in showing them what I can do. I shall strike to rescue Barbara, and perhaps I may find the one called Little Buttercup at the same time. Who knows?"

CHAPTER XXXI.

FOUND IN PICK POCKET.

WITHOUT delay, Jack Howland made inquiries in the hotel, but no one seemed to know that anything unusual had taken place there. The Land Sharks had done their work silently and swiftly.

In this emergency Jack was puzzled to know to whom he should turn. He was still afraid that Goldglove Gid was his sister's enemy, and he thought it possible the Man of Grit had known of the plan to kidnap her from the hotel. Perhaps his tools had accomplished the work while he, himself, remained where suspicion could not very well fall upon him.

With these thoughts surging through his over-heated brain, Jack hastened to confront the wearer of the gold-colored gloves. Gid was easily found.

"So you have succeeded in your two-faced game, have you?" cried the hot-headed brother, confronting the Man of Grit.

Gid stared at him in amazement.

"What are you driving at now?" he asked.

"As if you did not know well enough! While you mingled with the crowd, your tools were performing the black work you had planned."

"Have you gone crazy, young man?" demanded Gid, a puzzled light in his honest eyes. "If not, what is the matter with you?"

"You are a very clever actor, but you cannot deceive me as you once did my sister."

A frown darkened Goldglove's face.

"I have heard quite enough about this deceiving of your sister! It is getting monotonous, and I will have to ask you to give it a rest. I was the one deceived, but I am a man, and to expose the wound she made would only subject me to ridicule for my softness. Sympathy is something I never

desired or received. But what has happened that you should come at me again in this way? It is something, that is plain, and something that has stirred your blood. Tell me the truth."

"Do you have the face to say you know nothing of the kidnapping of my sister from the hotel?"

Gid started. "Of course I say so! When did it occur?"

"Since I left her safe in her room two hours ago."

"She is gone?"

"Yes; carried away by her enemies, of whom I believe you are the leader."

The Man of Grit lifted one yellow gloved hand solemnly.

"By all I hold sacred—by the memory of my mother in Heaven, I swear I knew nothing of this! I am not your sister's enemy, for all of the bitter past."

Looking straight into those honest blue eyes, Jack Howland could but believe the man spoke the truth.

"If I have wronged you," he said, with greater calmness, "I humbly beg your pardon. There is some mystery about the past and the present that I do not fully understand. I trust it will all be made clear in time. But my sister is gone—has fallen into the hands of her foes and mine. I can lead a party direct to the former stronghold of the outlaws who are known as the Land Sharks in this section. She is in their hands, and I am more than half-inclined to believe Blind Bent's daughter is there, too."

"You say you can lead the way to this stronghold?"

"Yes. All I need is a party of followers who will be ready to fight like tigers if the occasion demands."

"You shall have them."

An hour later a band of armed and mounted men were ready to leave Jericho City. Jack placed himself by Goldglove Gid's side at their head, and with a hoarse cheer and a thunder of hoofs, they swept out of town away into the moon-lighted night.

Of course Old Plug Ugly was with them, and the rounded, misshapen old fellow rode a horse as well as the best. His blood was leaping in his veins with something like the fire of youth, for he said it seemed like the old California days when he was a member of the famous "Regulators."

Away through the night rode the band of gallant men who had pledged themselves to do their best to rescue the missing ones from the clutches of their foes. Jack led them straight to the Land Sharks' retreat, but it was quite a long ride, and the moon had dropped well down into the west before they approached their destination.

At a certain distance from the cabin that concealed the mouth of the cave the men silently dismounted and examined their weapons to make sure they were in working order. A guard was left to look after the animals, then they began stealing noiselessly toward the spot where they hoped to find the kidnappers.

It was a thrilling spectacle to see those dark figures dodging from shadow to shadow like a pack of skulking animals, the moonlight glistening on their polished weapons whenever they passed from one spot of cover to another.

It was remarkable how little noise they made in their advance. Every man moved with as much caution as if his own life depended on his silence.

Along the rocky defile they passed and crept slowly up the slope. The cabin against the cliff was concealed by a dense mass of bushes and small trees around it, but these only gave the man-hunters additional cover.

A great silence was all around—the silence of a moonlight night amid the mountains. It was unbroken by the cry of prowling animal or nocturnal bird. And no keen-eyed sentry gave warning to the Land Sharks that deadly foes were approaching.

The men from Jericho came in sight of the cabin. It was silent and dark. The door was closed, but there was a deserted aspect about the place. The same thought seemed to force itself upon the approaching men at very nearly the same instant.

"Darned ef I don't believe they've slid out!" whispered Old Plug Ugly.

"Which would be nothing more than I

expected," returned Gid, cautiously. "Of course they had spies in Jericho, and our movements were known."

"Still they may be there," said Jack, hoping against hope. "They may be lying low and waiting to open fire on us as soon as we appear in the moonlighted space in front of the cabin."

"I am afraid you will be disappointed if you depend on that to any great extent," retorted Gid. "Still we must make calculations on such a thing."

He caused a few whispered directions to be passed from man to man. Then there was another minute of silence.

Suddenly, at a well-understood signal, the entire party sprang from cover and dashed upon the cabin. But they were not received by a volley. Still the cabin remained dark and silent.

"Down with the door!" was the cry.

Like a tornado, Goldglove Gid hurled his fine figure against it, and it flew inward with a crash. The men would have poured into the cabin, but Gid placed his muscular arms across the open doorway and barred their progress.

"Hold, pard!" he exclaimed. "Let's not plunge in there in the dark. It is best to understand what we are running into. There may be a trap of some kind. We must have a light."

"That's hoss-sense!" nodded Old Plug Ugly. "Scramble 'roun' an' git a torch o' some sort, you critters."

This the men hastened to do, but at least five minutes passed before the required torch was procured. With this in his hand, Goldglove Gid was about to lead the way, when an appalling thing occurred.

Without the least warning, there was a terrible roar, a great flash of red flame, and the cabin was blown into a thousand fragments. Nearly every man of the party was thrown off his feet, and many were struck by the flying timbers and fragments.

A powder-mine had been fired with the dastardly intent of destroying the entire party! Goldglove Gid's cool judgment alone had averted a fearful disaster.

For several moments the men were so stunned and amazed that they uttered no sounds, then cries and curses broke upon the air.

Although Gid had stood almost in the open doorway, by remarkable good fortune he had not been injured beyond a few bruises.

But some of the others were not so fortunate. Many of those who had been knocked down by the flying timbers were seriously hurt. Two men had broken arms, and a heavy timber had struck one man on the head, killing him instantly.

Had they rushed into the cabin when the door was first burst open, not one would have escaped with their lives.

Gid's first thought was to discover who was hurt.

"I reckon Sandy McPherson's got his last dose," said one, bending over the poor fellow who was struck on the head.

At this, savage cries broke from the lips of the now infuriated men.

"Sandy wuz er white man!"

"As good a boy as ever breathed!"

"Curse the black-hearted wretches who planned this foul work!"

"We will have revenge!"

"Rufe Fox has a broken arm."

"And so has Ike Straw."

"Is any one else hurt?"

But no one else was injured beyond a general shaking-up and some severe bruises. It was decided those who had been seriously hurt should at once return to Jericho, and those who accompanied them should carry the unfortunate fellow who had been murdered.

"It is plain our birds have flown," said Gid, as he gazed at the scattered timbers of the cabin, some of which had taken fire. "But there was one of them in this vicinity a short time ago, I am sure, for at least one man was left behind to fire this mine at the proper moment. Probably the fuse was touched when we broke in the door."

"An' but fer you," cried Old Plug Ugly, "ther hull gang o' us'd bin on ther road ter Kingdome Come now."

"It was surely his cool judgment that saved us," acknowledged Jack Howland.

"Hooray fer Goldglove Gid!" yelled the

deformed. "He's ther best man as ever stepped inter these yere parts!"

A cheer went up from the men. From that moment Gid's power as a leader was unlimited.

Everything was arranged and the party was to return to Jericho with the dead man and those with broken arms started off promising to send reinforcements, for the man-hunters had now sworn a solemn oath to know no rest till the kidnappers and murderers had met their just deserts.

Morning was not far away, so it was decided as the best course for them to wait for daylight. Although it might be a difficult thing to follow the trail of the Land Sharks, by daylight, still it would be better to make the attempt than it would to wander away on a blind hunt in the night. So they settled down to await the coming of day.

With dawn one of the men who had accompanied the party back to Jericho made his appearance, bringing interesting news. He declared Desperate Durg had been in Jericho, and had quietly ridden away toward Pick Pocket, accompanied by a single companion.

Now Goldglove Gid had not made a public accusation against Durg, but there were a few besides Old Plug Ugly and Jack Howland who understood the wearer of the gold-colored gloves thought the man of a dark record at the bottom of the vile work that had been recently performed in Jericho. The one who brought the information of Durg's late movements was among the number.

"Did he say where he was going?" asked Goldglove.

"No; he made no talk at all."

"But rode away toward Pick Pocket?"

"Yes."

"Gentlemen," and the Man of Grit turned to his companions, "I presume you can continue this hunt without me for a time?"

"We kin, ef it's necessary," confessed one; "but we hate ter almightyly."

"I wish to see this man known as Desperate Durg," said Gid. "In fact, it is of great importance that I should see him as soon as possible. Howland here knows this part of the country, and will act as your leader while I am gone. He is a man you can depend on."

As he said this his eyes met Jack's, and Barbara's brother crimsoned.

With a word to Old Plug Ugly, Gid sprang upon his splendid horse, the deformed following his example, and they rode away together, receiving a parting cheer from the men. Gid turned and waved one yellow-gloved hand, then the horses broke into a gallop, carrying their strangely contrasting riders out of sight.

It was more than three hours later when Goldglove Gid and Old Plug Ugly rode into Pick Pocket. They had not seen a sign of Desperate Durg upon the trail.

But as they rode down the main street of the town, a dozen men came pouring out of a saloon, with Durg among them. The man of a dark record saw his deadly enemy on the black horse, and, pointing him out, cried savagely:

"There he is! there he is! Shoot him down!"

"Come on, old man!" gritted Gid. "It's charge that gang or show the white feather. Are you with me?"

"Bet yer socks!" was Plug Ugly's reply.

Drawing their revolvers, they thundered down on Durg and his pards in the face of a perfect hail-storm of bullets!

CHAPTER XXXII.

LORD ALFRED HAS A CLOSE CALL.

It was a daring move, well worthy of the Man of Grit. None but a most daring spirit would have thought of charging the men to whom Durg had given an order of such deadly import.

And Old Plug Ugly?

During the short time he had known Goldglove Gid he had learned to rely implicitly on the judgment of the blue-eyed fellow, and if Gid had said the word, the hunchback would have followed him into the mouth of the fiery pit. There was no hesitation on his part.

"Lay low down!" fell sharply from Gid's lips, as he bent forward in the saddle so as to present as small a target as possible. "Use your revolver, but spare Desperate Durg. He is mine!"

The old man obeyed to the letter, and the bullets of the excited toughs flew all around them. Their weapons answered promptly, and several of the crowd were seen to bite the dust.

There was something fear-inspiring in the aspect of the two mounted men coming like a thunderbolt down the street, a cloud of dust whirling up behind the horses' heels and spouts of smoke shooting out upon each side of their necks, and the desperado gang, after firing a dozen shots and seeing three or four of their number go down, turned and fled for the nearest shelter. Bitter curses broke from Desperate Durg's lips, and with murderous deliberation he waited, cocked revolver in hand, to finish the man he hated with a single shot at close range.

But Old Plug Ugly's eyes were wide open, and he read Durg's intent as plainly as if it had been written on his face in blazing letters. He saw Durg lift his hand to fire, curling his left elbow and resting the revolver over his arm to make sure of his work.

With a savage howl of fury, the old hunchback rose in the saddle and hurled one of the revolvers in his hands straight at Durg's head. The weapon flew a trifle high, but it struck the desperate man's hat and knocked it from his head. At the same time it spoiled his aim, and the bullet from his revolver flew wide of the intended mark.

Durg waited for no more. His nerve suddenly failed him and he fled for shelter just as Gid and his aged companion thundered past.

The mounted men did not draw rein until they had passed far beyond pistol-shot of the enraged gang of desperadoes.

"Thet wuz w'at I calls keen work," grinned Plug Ugly. "Hain't struck sech er racket fer y'ars. I'm jest powerful glad I'm hyer, you bet!"

"Are you hit?"

"Reckon not; nary scratch. Are you?"

"I do not think I have sustained any further injury than a few holes in my clothes. I see they are clipped in several places."

"Waal, it's jest er holy wonder ye're not filled full o' lead, fer I reckon they all fired at you. Wuzn't skeersely er derved bullet sung roun' my ears."

"They simply obeyed the order of their leader. He told them to fire on me."

"No; he tole 'em ter shoot ye down, but they didn't make ther racket work fer shucks. Some o' them critters got socked, though. I kem mighty nigh lettin' Durg hev w'en he wuz takin' er bead on ye, but I flung my revolver at him an'—"

"And it is quite likely you saved my life, for he plainly meant to drop me then. I am not one who forgets such things, old man."

"Don't speak o' it!" exclaimed the hunchback. "I won't keer a hoot ef I only git my gun back. Thet's er mighty good iron, an' I don't want ter lose it."

"If you do, I will fill its place with another equally as good."

"W'at are ye goin' ter do now. It's sart'in ye can't yank Durg 'long as he hes thet gang ter back him."

"I will have two-thirds of the place with me in less than twenty minutes. I am known here."

Already were the citizens hurrying toward the two men to learn what the skirmish meant. Many of them hailed Gid with cries of welcome.

Pick Pocket was a placer camp, and nearly every man worked for himself on his own claim, so it was an easy thing for them to drop pan and shovel and investigate the disturbance in town. It was a small place, but the citizens were about as tough a set as could be found collected in one town anywhere in the Gunnison country, and there was nothing interested them so much as a good square fight of any kind.

"It's Gid, by thunder!" howled one loud-mouthed fellow.

Others took up the cry and in a few moments the two men from Jericho City were surrounded by a hard-looking set who were demanding to know the cause of the firing. The Man of Grit explained to them in terse phrases what had happened in Jericho and how he had followed Desperate Durg to Pick Pocket, only to be attacked in a murderous manner by Durg and a band of his pards as soon as he appeared.

"But with this yere rump-backed ole runt

ter help him, he waded right inter ther pot an' b'ilin' o' 'em an' scattered 'em ever' which-way," declared an eye-witness of the skirmish. "It wuz er reg'ler ole yow-yow o' er time, I tell you!"

"Ob, thet's Gid!" exclaimed another. "He don't keer er howl in *hel-ena* fer ther Old Boy an' all his imps."

"But who are ther critters as tried ter down him?"

"Red Blake's gang."

"It's time we run thet crowd out o' this yere town."

Gid asked their attention.

"I have come here to obtain aid in hunting down these women-stealers. Jericho has turned out a crowd of hunters; what will Pick Pocket do?"

"You kin count on us ter foller whar you lead," declared one, and others echoed his words.

It was not long before Gid had selected a dozen men on whom he knew he could rely. Then they moved on the saloon into which the defeated toughs had dodged when the dauntless horsemen charged the gang.

But the ruffianly crew had not been idle. While Gid was explaining and gathering his followers they quietly slipped out of the saloon by a back door, and only those who had been wounded in the fracas were found by the Man of Grit and those who accompanied him.

"They're leavin' town on hosses!" cried a man, rushing in from the street.

Surging out from the saloon, the crowd found he had told the truth. Some of the departing ruffians turned in the saddle, waved their hats and uttered taunting yells.

"If every man who can obtain a horse will join in the chase, we will give them a hot run," said Gid, watching the cloud of dust that was concealing the retreating mob.

In a short time a dozen armed and mounted men gathered around him and he led them from the town, cheered by those left behind.

For an hour the party rode at a swinging gallop along the trail toward Jericho. Then, with a suddenness that was startling, they came upon a tragic scene.

The desperado gang they were pursuing were in the very act of hanging a man from the limb of a tree!

That man was Lord Alfred Dumley!

With a bugle-like shout, Goldglove Gid led the charge upon Desperate Durg and his murderous pards, opening fire before he was within anything like sure pistol range. He did this, hoping the mob would be so startled that they would let Lord Alfred drop and fly. He made no mistake in his calculation, but already had the fat Englishman been swung by the neck and the rope made fast.

Dashing under the tree, Gid cut Lord Alfred down, feeling sure the man was far from dead, as he was still kicking feebly.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DESPERATE DURG'S MAD RIDE.

LORD ALFRED fell heavily to the ground and lay quite still. Gid wished to continue the pursuit, but he felt it would not be right to leave the man in that condition, for he might die, so he drew rein, shouting to Old Plug Ugly:

"Keep track of those murderous devils. I will overtake you."

The next moment he was kneeling by the unfortunate Englishman's side, doing his best to restore him to life.

"In less than thirty seconds more the man would have been past recovery," he muttered. "It is plain Helos Boderick has something against him, but I do not understand what it is. It is a wonder those ruffians did not pause long enough to fill this unlucky fellow's body with bullets. That would have finished him. Probably they thought him finished, anyway."

Milord began to choke and groan, showing he was coming round all right.

Suddenly Ginger appeared on the scene.

"Fo' de good Lawd's sakes!" gasped the darky, his eyes rolling with horror. "Is he dead, boss?"

"Not quite. He is coming round all right. But how came he in such a scrape?"

"Yo' see we had t' git out ob Jericho, fer dey jest made us skip or take de quincequonces. We was gittin' fo' de next to'n fast as we could trabble, w'en we com' right on dese odder fellers. Den dey cotched de boss an'

went fo' ter hang him on de tree. I kind ob fought it was time fo' me ter slide, an' so I slid w'ile dey was 'tendin' ter de boss. Dey didn't notiss me, an' I hid behin' de rocks ober dar tell you fellers com' up a-whicopin', glory to de Lamb!"

"You were fortunate to get off so easy, and when your master comes round, I would advise you to get out of these parts as quick as you can. It is not healthy for him here. He will be all right soon."

Without another word, the man of the gold-colored gloves leaped into the saddle and dashed away after his friends, leaving Lord Alfred to the care of his colored valet.

Within thirty minutes Gid came in sight of his friends, and soon after he joined them. They hailed him with delight.

"We hev bin kinder holdin' back fer ye," Old Plug Ugly explained. "Three o' ther boys are ahead, keepin' track o' ther heathen critters. Wuz ther Englisher cooked?"

"No, he will come round all right. I left him in care of his colored servant, who was hid behind the rocks a short distance away while the hanging was going on."

The party now hastened to overtake those ahead, and it was not long before they came up with the first one, who was waiting for them.

"Red Blake and the others left the trail hyer," he explained. "Jed an' Joe hev kep' track of 'em w'ile I staid behin' ter tell ye."

The pursued party had turned toward the wildest part of the mountain region.

"They've got er hang-out over in thar somewhar," observed Plug Ugly.

"Ur else they cal'late they're goin' ter slip us 'mong ther ravines," added another.

"P'raps they mean ter show fight somewhar. They might fin' er good place ter ambush us thar."

Still the pursuers pressed hotly on. In a short time they came upon another of their comrades, who had been left behind by his companion to tell them which course the flying desperadoes had taken.

"We mus' git within sight o' 'em afore they come ter ernother chance ter puzzle us 'bout ther course they take," declared the old hunchback. "This is er mighty poor section fer trailin', an' they'd be shore ter git clean off ef we wuz forced ter foller 'em in sech a manner."

Suddenly the distant report of a rifle came to their ears.

"Holy poker!" exclaimed one. "I'll bet er muel thet means Jed Small's been salted by them critters!"

This created no little excitement among the pursuers, but before long they came upon Small standing beside his dead horse, looking sorrowfully and angrily down at the animal.

"As good 'er critter's I ever straddled!" he cried; "an' them imps o' sin shot it from under me! But they shell pay fer it—they shell pay fer it!"

"Kireet ye are, pard!" agreed one of Jed's friends. "They shell pay fer it dearly. But we're mighty glad ter see ye on yearth, fer we reckoned ther pimps hed salted you instid o' ther hoss."

"It wuz meant fer me, I'll 'lew; but ther ole hoss threw up his head jest in time ter take ther bullet in his brain an' save me."

"Wal, hop up hyer ahind me, pard."

So Small mounted behind one of his friends, and again the pursuit was continued.

The country grew rougher and wilder, and the progress more difficult. The desperado gang had passed out of sight, but from the nature of the section, the pursuers knew they were still ahead.

"They probably know this ground like a book," said Gid to Old Plug Ugly at his side. "They will either stop and fight us before long, or they will find a way to give us the slip. Helos Boderick is not the man to lead us to his lair."

"Helos Boderick—who's him?"

"That is the correct name of the man whom you know as Desperate Durg."

"Oh!"

"Yes; his true name is not Durgan at all."

"Helos Boderick!" muttered the old man. "Great Scott! w'at a handle! I don't wonder he changed it!"

"And yet that was a name respected in the State of Kentucky at one time."

"So he's from Kentucky?"

"Yes."

"An' yo'?"

"I am from the same State."

"I reckoned so. W'at did this Boderick do thet he hed ter light out an' change his name?"

"He did not do anything. His brother committed a murder for which he suffered the full penalty of the law. That disgraced the name of Boderick in that section forever, and possibly that was why he changed his name."

"But he hain't got er much better reppy-tasion under his present cognomen. It's only because he is a mighty bad man ter fool with thet he hes been let run loose so long. People didn't keer ter tackle him, but now they hev some one ter lead 'em erg'in' him, they'll never rest tell he hes lit out o' this part o' ther kentry or hes his infernal woozle stretched. His days in this section are mighty few."

"Halt there!"

Clear and distinct came the command, causing the party to draw rein involuntarily.

"That is right!" cried the voice of Desperate Durg. "If you had not stopped promptly, your saddles would have been emptied by a shower of bullets."

Out in plain view upon the top of a large boulder sprung the daring villain, at the same time adding:

"The galoot who pulls a pop on me gets socked for keeps. My friends are lying behind these rocks and have every man of you covered with cocked weapons. I hope you fully comprehend the situation."

The hunchback ground out an oath, but Goldglove Gid seemed as indifferent as a statue. Others of the party followed Plug Ugly's example and swore roundly.

Durg laughed in their faces.

"Why, you poor fools!" he sneered, "did you think we were going to run from you all day? Your is party but little larger than ours, and we have the advantage of the drop. That counts *big* in this little game."

Still Goldglove Gid did not speak, but his eyes were busy. He was trying to locate the position of Durg's companions. It was plain they held an advantageous position if, as Durg claimed, they were concealed behind the rocks. The desperadoes could pick off the entire party of their pursuers before the rocky barrier could be reached by Gid's friends from Pick Pocket.

"W'at shell we do?" asked the deformed, speaking in a low tone. "Say ther word, pard, an' we'll charge them rocks hill-whoop-in'."

"It is best to go slow," replied Gid, in a cautious tone. "If Durg's pards are concealed there, it would be madness to attack them. We are not here to throw away the life of a single man."

A taunting laugh came from the desperado on the boulder.

"I thought you would chain up when you understood how the land laid," he said. "It is our place to dictate terms to you now."

"What do ye want?" sullenly demanded Old Plug Ugly.

"Are you the leader of that party of hot-headed fools?" asked Durg. "Is it possible they are following such a handsome specimen of humanity? *Stop!*" for, with a curse, the old man had reached toward a revolver.

"If you pull, down you go!"

"Keep a civil tongue in yer head!" snarled the deformed. "If ye don't—"

"If I don't—what will happen? Now do not make foolish talk. Is Gideon Gordan the leader of that party?"

"I am," replied the Man of Grit.

"Thea you are the chap I am going to fire my mouth at. First—what do you want?"

"We want *you*."

"I thought likely. Is that all?"

"If you will surrender, the rest of the gang will be allowed to depart after paying for the horse one of your number shot back here a piece."

"How generous!" sneered the man on the boulder. "Your terms take me quite by surprise. But what are you pursuing us for, anyhow? What have we done to give you cause for such an action?"

"It is not necessary to state that here, for you know well enough what you have done. We are bound to take you, dead or alive."

At this Durg laughed contemptuously.

"You are scarcely aware of the dimensions of the job you have tackled. With a small army behind you, you could not take me. I know every inch of the region back of me, and could play hide and seek with you there to my amusement. But I do not care to run before you like a criminal, so I demand that your entire party turn back and leave us alone."

"A modest demand, indeed!" retorted Gid. "But you see we are not built that way. We mean business."

"And so do I. I am afraid you scarcely comprehend the situation even now. You are my hated foe; all I need do is give the signal, and my men will riddle your body with bullets. Your life is in my hand."

"You lie!"

Then the Man of Grit shouted:

"Pards, this is a trick! There is not a man concealed behind those rocks! He is parleying with us while his comrades escape. Follow me!"

But Durg did not wait for the charge. With a yell of derision, he snatched out a revolver and took a snap shot at Gid, the bullet providentially flying wide of the mark. Then he leaped from the boulder to the back of his waiting horse and galloped away.

Past the rocky barrier dashed the pursuers, headed by the wearer of the gold-colored gloves. Then they saw Desperate Durg disappear over the brink of what appeared almost a perpendicular descent. Galloping to that point, the entire party drew rein, with a cry of amazement.

At their feet the rocky slope fell off at a perilous angle, making it dangerous and difficult for a cautious man to descend by picking his course, and apparently impossible ground to be ridden over in the saddle. Still, Desperate Durg—desperate in truth—was half-way down the descent, sitting erect in the saddle, his noble horse leaping with the sure-footedness of a mountain-goat.

"Furies! the man is mad!"

"He will be dashed into jelly on those rocks down there!"

"It is a sure ride to death!"

"I'd give a thousand dollars for that horse!"

"He'll be vulture fodder when he reaches the bottom!"

Still the noble animal sprang in safety from point to point, its iron-shod hoofs ringing out sharply on the rocks. Sometimes it would settle on its haunches and slide several feet, striking the empty air with its forward hoofs. Detached stones and small masses of earth rolled from beneath its feet and went shooting down the incline. Down—down plunged the superb horse and Desperate Durg his rider!

"Ah!"

The exclamation from the spectators of the mad ride was something like a groan of dismay. Strangely enough, their sympathy for the time was with the man they had been so hotly pursuing.

"There they go!"

But, the horse did not fall. It recovered itself and sprang on and down again. It did not seem possible the man and beast could reach the bottom alive—but they did!

With a long breath of relief, the watchers saw them reach the level of the gorge. Then Desperate Durg turned in the saddle, waving his hat above his head and sending back a clear yell of defiance and triumph.

It was answered by a hearty cheer from the pursuers, who waved their hats in response.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CLOSE TO DEATH.

It is natural for human beings to admire brave and daring acts, regardless of who performs them. Deeds of reckless daring thrill the heart and command the admiration of all. It was the most natural thing in the world that Durg's pursuers should utter a cheer when they witnessed the successful termination of his fearful ride, and cheer they did, even though they knew he had escaped them for the time.

"That critter's in league with the devil, I reckon!" exclaimed Old Plug Ugly. "Ef he hedn't bin helped by Satan, he'd never got down thar alive!"

"That's pritty nigh right, pard," agreed a man, at his elbow. "Thar hain't no other livin' human as kin make that ride."

"I think too much of my horse to make the attempt," laughed Goldglove Gid. "I have as good an animal as the one that carried him down in safety, but, if I was willing to risk my own neck, I should hesitate about sending Tornado down over those rocks."

"Wal, he hes slipped us clean enough," admitted Plug Ugly, as Durg disappeared in the distance. "He played er fine leetle trick on us."

"Thet's so."

"I never tumbled."

"I wuz lookin' fer some sign of ther gang ahind ther rocks, but we'n I failed ter see 'em, I never once 'maged they wuzn't thar."

"Ther hull gang o' us'd sot thar like er mess o' blamed fools an' listened ter his bluff 'ithout ketchin on ter ther game ef 'tadn't bin fer Gid," declared the hunchback.

"But w'at's ter be did now?"

"This chase hain't over by er derved sight!"

"Right you are!"

"W'at duz Goldglove say?"

"We will follow the best we can," said Gid, quietly. "I do not fancy any of us wants to give up beaten just because we were wooled by a trick."

"No! no!"

"Desperate Durg is our game. I have started out to make this section hot for him, and you may gamble I am going to do it!"

"Hooray fer Gid!"

"We must find some way of getting down there where we can follow him."

This was much easier said than done, but after nearly an hour of searching, a place was discovered where the entire party could descend to the bottom of the gorge. Then the pursuit was recommenced, with Old Plug Ugly leading and acting as trailer.

"It don't need enny fine work round hyer," said the old man, leading them forward at a rapid pace. "Fine figgerin' 'll come in w'en we reach er spot whar he might go more'n one way. He c'u'd only keep right ahead hyer."

"I dunno 'bout thet," laughed one of the party. "With thet thar hoss of his'n, I'll 'low he might ride right up one of these yere puppendickler banks."

"Thet's so, an' not much more'n hafe try."

It was not long before they came to a place where the man they were pursuing could have taken his choice of three different courses, and Old Plug Ugly was bothered for some little time.

"I'll 'dmit er onery red-skin trailer'd never halted hyer one derved second," said the hunchback. "But they do beat the devil, an' no mistake. This groun's mighty rocky, an' it hain't no easy thing fer er white man ter pick up er trail hyer."

However, after a time, he discovered the course Durg had taken, and the pursuit was again resumed. But the delays became frequent and aggravating. Finally Plug Ugly said:

"We'll continner this kind o' business ef you say so, Gid; but I'll 'low 'tain't er derved bit o' use. He's gittin' clean off like er coyote, wile we're follerin' like mud-turkles."

"Then I think we had better unite with the party from Jericho City. We shall probably find them at or near the spot where the cabin was blown up. If they are not there, they have probably left a man with directions about joining them. Consolidated, we will make a grand hunt. What do you say, pards?"

The men were all favorable, so Old Plug Ugly was instructed to lead them toward the shattered cabin. This was not an easy task, unless they returned to the regular stage-trail between Jericho and Pick Pocket, but the hunchback would not hear to such a thing.

"Thet'd kerry us clean erway out o' our way," he asserted. "I kin lead ye ter the place whar we want ter go, and never think o' goin' back ter the trail."

"That settles it," smiled Gid. "We will depend on you."

The old man kept his word faithfully, but the afternoon was half-spent before they approached the vicinity of the destroyed cabin. They were yet more than a mile from the spot when Gid's keen eyes detected the forms of two men running swiftly from the mouth of a wooded niche. He shouted

for them to halt, but, casting startled looks over their shoulders, they ran on still faster. Immediately the entire party started in pursuit.

As they were passing the break in the rocky wall of the ravine, a cry for help came to the ears of the Man of Grit, causing him to draw rein so suddenly that his horse was thrown back upon its haunches. Some of the party stopped, while others kept on in pursuit of the unknown man.

"Help! help! Be quick, for God's sake! In another minute I shall be a dead man!"

Gid fancied he recognized the voice as that of Barbara Howland's brother, Jack!

In an instant he was off his horse and running toward the wooded recess. Bursting through the shrubbery, his eyes were greeted by a startling sight.

Tied firmly to a small tree, so he could not move hand or foot, was Jack Howland. Close beside him was a small powder-keg with but little more than an inch of a lighted and hissing fuse protruding from the bung hole!

The sight was enough to root a common man in his tracks or send him flying in terror from the spot. But Goldglove Gid was not a common man.

It almost seemed he cleared the space between himself and the keg of powder at a single bound and with the rapidity of a flash of light. His grasp was certain and swift, his fingers closing on the bit of fuse at the very instant when only enough of it remained for him to get a scant hold. Then he tore it from the keg and ground it beneath his heel.

Jack was saved!

"Great heavings ter Betsey!" gasped Old Plug Ugly, who had witnessed the wonderful daring of the Man of Grit. "W'at's in thet keg—water?"

"It is filled with powder," declared Jack. "He has saved my life at the risk of his own!"

"Great catamaran!" cried the old hunchback, advancing cautiously and eying the now harmless keg askance. "Thet wuz ther most darin' thing I never saw! Blamed ef it don't knock Durg's ride clean ter thunder!"

"It was a deed I shall never forget till my dying day," earnestly declared Jack, as he was released. Gordan, will you accept my hand?"

With a smile, Gid grasped the outstretched hand of the man who had been his bitter enemy twenty-four hours before.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE LAND SHARKS' FAIR CAPTIVES.

IN the wildest part of the region, within thirty miles of Jericho City, the Land Sharks had taken up their second abode in a large cavern accidentally discovered by one of their number. To this place were carried the kidnapped girls, Barbara and Zoe.

By some kind of misunderstanding, the men who were detailed to capture Little Buttercup also took Daisy Wyldove a prisoner and carried her along with them, despite her protestations. They would not believe her when she told them she was in the little game and was not to be molested, and when she became furious and fought like an enraged cat, they quietly bound her hands and feet.

"Oh, you thick-headed brutes!" she cried, shrilly; "You do not know enough to sleep when you are tired! Release me, or I will yell!"

As they did not release her, she began to yell in a manner that threatened to bring a band of pursuers down on them in double-quick order. At a word of command, she was promptly gagged, after which she could only gurgle and moan. It was truly rough on her after what she had done to aid them in their work.

After a tiresome ride through the night, the cavern was reached, much to the relief of every one. Daisy had long since ceased to gurgle, but she was simply waiting to have the gag release her aching jaws when she would once more turn upon the men and tell them what she thought of them and their blundering leader.

The desperadoes made another blunder by placing Barbara and Little Buttercup together in a rocky niche of the cavern, where they could converse freely with each other. Durg had warned the men to keep the girls

apart, but they had misunderstood him, with the result that the little actress was kept from speaking to the other captives. It was a lucky mistake for Durg, for Daisy was so furious at the treatment she had received that she had resolved to expose the desperate man's game to the girl she had lured into the trap, which would have ruined in a great measure the plans of the wily Land Shark captain.

As for Durg himself, he remained with a small party of his dastardly band to watch the movements of the pursuers. Although quite a shrewd man, he made a great mistake in not mingling with those pursuers in such a manner as to have averted suspicion from himself, at least. It happened at the very moment when the rush was made from the Metropolitan Saloon he was unaware of the move, and he did not discover it till the men had gathered in and around Blind Bent's cabin.

But even then it was not too late for him to have made a successful play in his great double game. He had been popular in Jericho, and if he had boldly thrust himself into the party, asking the cause of the excitement, he would have deceived the majority of them and might have prevented Goldglove Gid from obtaining the leadership in the pursuit. The word of a blind man would have scarcely prevailed against him. But many a skillful general has ruined all his plans by one false move; and Durg was destined to defeat himself in the end by his lack of boldness at the critical point in the game.

The blowing up of the cabin against the cliff was one of his diabolical schemes by which he hoped to get rid of Goldglove Gid, Jack Howland and Old Plug Ugly at one stroke. With the fiendish disregard for human life that characterizes some desperadoes, he cared not how many were killed with those three men so long as they were wiped from the face of the earth. He had come to know the old hunchback for what he was and fear him as a dangerous foe.

But in that matter his plans miscarried, and the only man killed was one who, time and again, had expressed his admiration for the dastard who finally became his destroyer. Durg's three chief foes escaped with scarcely a scratch. Cursing his crooked fortune when he learned the result of the explosion, he hurried back to Jericho to perfect his plans there. From Jericho he rode, with Hustler Hank for a companion, to Pick Pocket to muster his supporters there, for he began to realize that a desperate struggle was inevitable and he desired all the support he could raise.

When Little Buttercup found herself a captive in the outlaws' cave with only Barbara for a companion and two armed men posted as a guard in a narrow passage, she burst into tears.

"Oh, my poor daddy!" she moaned, wringing her hands. "What will he think? It will kill him!"

The miserable light of a smoking lamp revealed Zoe's grief-distorted face to her companion, and creeping to the poor child's side, Barbara clasped her in her arm, saying with forced cheerfulness:

"Don't cry about it, my poor girl! It may all come out right in the end."

But at this it seemed Zoe only sobbed the harder, her slender form being convulsed with grief. The sympathetic tears swelled up to Barbara's eyes, but she forced them back bravely. Had she been alone she might have given away to grief herself, for her own heart was full to overflowing; but under the circumstances, she felt it her duty to comfort and cheer her companion in misfortune, if possible.

"Don't take on so!" she entreated once more. "Our case is not hopeless, by any means."

But still Little Buttercup wrung her hands, not seeming to hear the other's words, and moaned:

"Oh, my poor blind daddy! It will kill him! It will kill him!"

"We will be rescued by and by and you shall go back to your daddy," whispered Barbara. "There are friends—"

At this Zoe started up.

"Friends!" she cried, stretching out her arms in a pitiful manner. "I have no friends who will come to my rescue! I am lost, lost, lost!"

It was a touching sight to see the beautiful girl—little more than a child—crouching there upon the bare cavern floor and stretching out her fair young arms as she uttered the heart-broken cry:

"Lost, lost, lost!"

And unless by the kind dispensation of an All-wise Heavenly Father she was soon released from the grasp of the black-hearted scoundrel who had caused her to be snatched from her father's side, she was indeed lost and ruined! She was in the clutch of a human harpy and she stood on the brink of a doom too black to contemplate without a shudder.

Barbara believed she understood the position of the unfortunate child, and her heart was wrung with bitterness against the man who had thus far successfully carried out his vile plots. But in one thing she was greatly in error, and that was in her belief that she knew who had planned and executed the movements against herself and Little Buttercup.

"Are you sure you have no friends?" she asked, earnestly. "Think—"

"There may be one—I believe there is," spoke Zoe, more slowly and with less excitement.

"Who?"

"Mr. Durgan."

"Ah?"

"Yes, I think he is my friend. But I cannot be sure he will pursue these wicked men and rescue me."

"Well, he is also my friend, so he will have a double motive."

Zoe gave a joyful start.

"Do you know him?" she asked, forgetting for a moment that Barbara had once admitted as much to her.

"Yes, I know him well."

Ah! you thought so, Barbara! but you had not fathomed the black depths of the man's heart!

Little Buttercup clutched eagerly at her companion's arm.

"And do you think he will save us?" she whispered, hoarsely, glancing along the dark passage with a sudden fear that the guards would hear her words.

"I think he will do what he can, and I believe he has considerable influence in Jericho."

"Yes, yes; he, has!"

"And I have a brother who will do everything in his power for us."

"Then there may really be hope?"

"Certainly there is hope. This is the third time I have been in the power of these men. I have escaped twice before, and I hope to escape again."

"You will not—leave me—behind?"

Barbara again clasped the little singer in her arms.

"Of course I will not leave you behind; you may depend on that."

Zoe grew cheerful with surprising swiftness.

"How did they succeed in getting their hands on you?" asked Barbara.

Then Zoe explained how she had left the cabin to meet the little actress, and the masked men had suddenly come upon them and seized them both. Barbara shook her head.

"Why did you go out there to meet this Miss Wyldove after your father was asleep?" she asked.

"She wished me to."

"That is something I cannot understand. Why should she wish you to meet her at such an hour?"

"She said she had something of importance to tell me."

"What was it?"

"I did not find out; but I know it was something about my singing. She thinks I had better take lessons and go on the stage."

"Why couldn't she have told you as well some other time?"

"I don't know."

"It looks suspicious."

"What do you mean?"

"It looks as if this woman is in the plot against you."

"Oh I am sure you are wrong! She is a friend of Mr. Durgan, and she was the one who told me the man of the gold gloves is my enemy."

Again Barbara shook her head.

"She was right in that respect, I believe,

for it seems to me that Gideon Gordan is the man who caused us to be brought here. He is the man who lured me into this part of the country, and I fancy I see through his game. If I should suddenly disappear, he can turn up as my husband and lay claim to all my wealth. He retained the marriage certificate, and that would be sufficient to verify his word. Oh, the miserable wretch!"

"What are you saying?" asked Zoe, wonderingly. "I do not understand."

"It is nothing—nothing! Do not mind it! I forgot myself for the time. One thing is certain—we know the man who is at the bottom of our trouble."

"Yes."

"I wonder how his tools gained access to my room at the hotel? I was asleep in a chair, with my head resting on the little table, waiting for brother Jack to return. I heard no sound to arouse me till I felt myself clutched, and a chloroform-saturated cloth was pressed over my mouth and nose. I struggled and tried to scream, but it was useless. That terrible, sickening odor stole away my senses, and I knew no more till the cool night-air aroused me. Then I was held upon the back of a horse by the strong arms of a man, and we were traveling on and on through the night."

Thus the two girls talked together for hours, till finally they lay down upon the blankets provided for a bed and fell asleep.

They were aroused by the sharp voice of Daisy Wyldove.

"I tell you I will see them!" the little actress cried. "Get out of my way and let me pass! I never saw such a mess of block-heads!"

"You cannot go in there, miss," replied the firm voice of the guard.

"I will, I will, I will!" screamed Daisy, in a perfect fury. "I am going to see them girls and tell them the truth. I have been treated wretchedly, and I am bound to retaliate. I am ashamed of the part I have taken in this miserable business, anyway. Let me pass!"

But she did not succeed in getting in to the girls, and two of the men were forced to carry her away by main force, while she fought and screamed, her cries sending weird echoes through the great cave.

Barbara and Zoe listened to the sounds until the screams of the unlucky actress had died out in the distance. There was something horrible about the sounds, as if the woman were being murdered, and their blood was chilled even though they felt sure she was not injured.

This incident gave them more food for conversation, and confirmed Barbara's belief that Daisy was in the plot against Little Buttercup.

Food was brought them at intervals, and so the hours slipped away. They made no attempt to escape, for a glance down the narrow passage showed them the armed guard and revealed the folly of such a move.

It seemed as if many days had elapsed when to their ears came the sounds of a great commotion in the further limits of the cave. The hoarse cheering of many men resounded through the underground arches and caused the captives to leap to their feet, their hearts throbbing with a hope that was quickly shattered as they heard one of the guards say to his companion:

"I reckon ther captain has come."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE HAWK AND THE DOVE.

DURG had arrived at the cave. After he had been greeted boisterously by his followers, he requested that Samuel Slick and Pious Dick be sent to him. He had now assumed the character of Captain Shark, and his face was concealed by a mask.

The pious rascal and the bogus officer were not long in making their appearance, but they came into their chief's presence with much fear and trembling, for they knew full well what was in store for them.

Durg began to grow furious as soon as his eyes fell on the two cringing rascal.

"You are two smart birds, aren't you?" he snarled.

"The good Lawd save us!" gasped Pious Dick, rolling his eyes upward, his knees shaking beneath him.

"E-excuse m-m me!" stammered Slick, washing his hands nervously in invisible

water. "I-I-I am afraid I do not understand you."

"Well, you will understand!" and the outlaw captain snatched out a revolver. "I have half a mind to shoot you both through your cowardly hearts!"

"Heaven save him from havin' a whole mind!" whispered Dick, his face growing ashen. "The dear Lawd knows I do want to live a few more more miserable years."

"You obeyed my directions finely, didn't you?" sneered the mask.

"What directions, captain?—Great Scott! don't shoot!"

"As if you did not know, you cowardly cur!"

"Lawd bless us!" ventured Dick. "He means erbout 'restin' ther critter of ther gold gloves."

"That is exactly what I mean. Why did you fail me?"

"If you will listen, captain," said Slick, bowing low, "I will endeavor to explain our failure to carry out your orders. It was—"

"I understand the excuse you would make, but the real reason was that you were too cowardly to do as you were directed."

"Upon my honor—"

"You have none!"

"Well, then, upon my word, we were unable to find the man in Jericho."

Durg laughed harshly.

"That will not wash! Down upon your knees, both of you, and say your prayers!"

In the greatest terror the two rascals fell upon their knees and began to beg for their lives. The chief of the Land Sharks watched them closely as if he was counting the seconds, and the unfortunate tools of an unscrupulous man felt that their last hour had arrived.

But, suddenly, Captain Shark put up his revolver and waved his hand.

"Get up!" he commanded, sneeringly. "You are spared for the present. Get out of my sight, and remember your safety depends on your future actions."

They slunk away, overjoyed to escape so easily.

The chief summoned another man to his side.

"What disposition has been made of the captives?" he asked.

When the fellow had told him, Captain Shark leaped to his feet in a perfect whirlwind of fury.

"The saloon singer a captive!" he shouted. "What blazing blunder is this? I gave orders that she was not to be molested. Some more miserable work! And the girls confined together! Oh, what fools! That was something I expressly forbade!"

With an effort, he controlled himself after pacing the rocky floor several minutes.

"Have the girls separated at once," he ordered, "leave the older one where she is, but take the other to the little round chamber and have the guards keep quite beyond her sight. Make sure she has a good light. Be lively!"

When the fellow had darted away to see that these orders were carried out, the chief called for something to eat, and food was soon brought him. He was hungry, and despite his recent rage, he ate heartily. The food put him in a better spirit.

"I do not suppose I have any reason to complain," he muttered, as he tossed off a glass of liquor. "It is true my enemies are all alive, but the girls are in my hands. One is handsome, and in her I have a wife and a fortune. The other is young, fresh, beautiful. In her I have— Ha, ha! I almost believe I prize her as much as the other. I will see her soon. If Barbara has not told her too much, I shall have little trouble with her. And what could Barbara tell her that would injure me in her eyes? I almost fancy Barbara, herself, looks on me at the present moment as her best friend. Oh, I have played the double game skillfully, and now the prize is mine! It is well worth my trouble! She shall publicly become my wife. Bogus marriages of a secret kind may serve a purpose, but a genuine marriage is necessary to get the prize fast and safe and place her wealth in my grasp. I almost wonder at the success of my game in the past. And to this day neither Gordon nor the girl he loved dreams how skillfully I deceived them and rent them asunder at the very moment when

such a thing seemed an impossibility. Bold play wins in such great games."

He might have added that villainy was often crushed at the moment of its greatest apparent triumph.

He arose from his feast, having determined to see Little Buttercup at once. But there was a scheme in his head. He could not see her with a mask over his face, therefore he removed the covering. He would deceive her.

Picking up a rope ladder, he made his way toward the small chamber to which the little singer had been removed; but he did not approach it by passing the guards. He knew another way, and in a short time he was high up on a ledge of rock above Little Buttercup's head looking down upon the poor child, who was weeping as if her heart would break because of her separation from Barbara.

Cautiously the double-faced villain adjusted the rope ladder and made it ready for descent. Then he softly called:

"Zoel!"

The girl started and looked around.

"Zoel!" he repeated.

"Who calls my name?" she whispered, excitedly, staring around in both hope and fear.

"It is I—Harold Durgan," replied the plotter, cautiously. "Do not make a noise to alarm the guards. I am on a shelf of rock here over your head. Keep still. I am coming down."

Then he let the ladder fall, and it swiftly unrolled till one end fell upon the rocks at her feet.

In sudden joy and hope, the little singer sunk on her knees with her hands upstretched to the dark figure she could dimly see descending the swaying rope. It was with the greatest difficulty she repressed a wild scream of joyous welcome.

"Oh, he has come to save me!" she thought. "He will take me back to my poor old blind daddy! What a brave and noble man he is!"

Durg swiftly made his way down the ladder. His feet touched the rocky floor, he was alone in the chamber with Little Buttercup.

"You have come to save me!" she whispered, wildly, springing toward him.

"Or die with you, my little darling!" was his thrilling reply, as he caught her in his arms and kissed her again and again.

She was startled, amazed, so much so that for a time she lay unresisting in his grasp. He held her close, while he rained passionate kisses on her pure lips.

But suddenly she started away, gasping:

"Oh, Mr. Durgan! what makes you do this to me?"

"Because I love you!" was his reply, as he drew her into his embrace again. "Trust me, my little darling, and I will save you from these ruffians or die with you!"

Save her! Ah! the dove had fallen into the talons of the hawk, and poor little Zoe was in the greatest peril of her life!

CHAPTER XXXVII.

NEW ALLIES AND A NIGHT MOVE.

JACK HOWLAND grasped Goldglove Gid's hand warmly, firmly convinced the man was not so black as his sister had led him to believe. Of course he could not understand how Barbara had been led into such an error, but, to tell the truth, he did not think of that then. Gid had twice saved his life, once at the risk of his own when the delay of a second or the miscalculation of half an inch would have rewarded him for his daring heroism with instant annihilation. Only one man in a thousand would have taken such desperate chances to save a person who had openly declared his enmity.

When the handshaking and congratulations were over, Old Plug Ugly asked:

"How in sin's name did ye happen ter be in sich an all-fired fix, lad? I thought ye wuz with t'others."

"I found it necessary to suddenly leave them," replied Jack.

"How wuz that?"

"After your departure a little dispute arose, and it ended by one of the men, Bob Woods—"

"A crooked two-faced skunk!"

"Well, he denounced me as being one of the outlaws and said I had led the party to

the cabin against the cliff for the express purpose of having them fall into the trap and be blown to pieces."

"An' ther boys believed it?"

"Some of them—the majority."

"Ther derved fools!"

"Some who seemed to be friendly advised me to get out. I was inclined to stand my ground and defend myself, but the odds were too great, so I left them."

"An' ye kem almighty nigh not seein' 'em ergain. How 'bout this yere fix we foun' ye in?"

"I had the misfortune to fall into the hands of some of the Land Sharks. They brought me here and decided to blow me out of existence."

"An' ther critters'd succeeded of 'tadn't bin fer this yere royal lad o' ther gold-colored gloves. Oh, I tell you he's a holy howler from Hot Hill, an' don't ye fergit it! He's a lad ter swear by an' tie to!"

"I shall not soon forget what he had done for me," declared Jack, earnestly. "The time may come when I can repay the debt."

"If that will restore us to our former relations, I hope it will never come," said Gid, gravely.

An unfathomable look flitted across Jack's face, but he said:

"There is some mystery about the past—I am sure of it. I trust everything may be made clear in the near future."

Gid said nothing, for he could not believe the future held anything of joy in store for him save the complete overthrow of the man whom he had once trusted as a friend but whom he now knew as a black-hearted villain.

In a short time those who had pursued the flying outlaws returned with the information that the desperadoes had escaped. Being quite familiar with the ground, they had fled where mounted men could not pursue and were soon lost to view.

"Waal, we may git at 'em at ther grand round-up," nodded Old Plug Ugly.

"If we ever get to the round-up," said one of the men, doubtfully.

"Waal, we'll git thar."

"It doesn't look much like it now."

"Thet's true, but we're stayers."

"My stomach needs something to make that a stayer," laughed another. "It is as hollow as a base drum."

"We didn't count on no sech a campaign as this."

"And one who wishes to withdraw can do so now," said Gid, running his eyes over the faces that surrounded him.

"Oh, we're not fer withdrawin' ef we kin only hev some fodder, but fodder we must hev or perish."

"You have not been out so long as the men from Jericho. We had better find them as soon as possible. Perhaps they have obtained rations from Jericho."

"If I go back to them I shall only get myself into trouble," said Jack.

"I will stand by you," assured Gid.

"That is enough; I will go. I am certain the one called Bob Woods who denounced me is one of the Land Sharks."

"We will attend to his case."

Without further delay, Jack led them to the spot where he parted with the men from Jericho. There Plug Ugly took up the trail, and in an hour the two parties united, Goldglove Gid's appearance being greeted by cheers.

But Jack Howland was quickly spotted, and Bob Woods stepped forward, demanding:

"W'at's that critter back hyer fer? We hain't got no use fer him."

Goldglove instantly turned on the speaker. "What are you saying?" he sharply asked.

"We hain't got no use fer thet galoot," repeated Woods, pointing at Jack.

"What is the matter with him?"

"He is er derved sneak, an' we 'low as how he's one o' ther p'izen critters we are arter."

"Well, I will allow you do not know anything about it."

Woods seemed a bit taken back, but he quickly recovered, and snapped, savagely:

"P'raps I don't; then erg'in, p'raps I do! Didn't ther derved whelp lead us straight ter ther cabin whar we all kem nigh bein' blown ter glory?"

"I don't reckon you came very near it," said one of the party. "You were left to look after the horses."

"By his own request, if I remember right," said Gid.

"Thet don't make no difference. Ther rest of ye kem nigh gittin' h'isted, an' I reckon thet galoot led ye inter ther trap on puppose. He knew erbout it all ther time."

"You're a blamed liar from Fibtown!" cried Old Plug Ugly, excitedly. "Jack was one o' ther first as stud reddy ter rush in. Ef 't'adn't bin fer Gid, he'd bin blowed with ther rest o' us."

Woods's hand crept toward a weapon, and a black scowl settled on his face.

"I am not ther man ter take ther lie from ary derned livin' critter!" he growled.

"Drop it!" fell sharply from Goldglove Gid's lips, as he covered Woods with a ready weapon. "Pull that gun and I bore you for business!"

"Oh, fer hevings sake don't chip inter this, pard!" entreated the hunchback. "Let me hev it out with ther critter. I'll cook his goose."

"It is no time for a quarrel of this sort, and so I shall not permit it."

"One thing's certain," declared Woods, sullenly. "Ef thet galoot as led us ter ther cabin remains with ther party, I don't."

"Then you had better get," cried the Man of Grit. "I do not believe we have any use for you anyway. Slope! Make yourself invisible!"

The baffled man sullenly mounted his horse, but before he rode away, he turned to the men and said:

"Let me tell you this: You'll be sorry fer trustin' either of them men. I'll bet my las' dollar they're both workin' erg'in' ye. Now mark w'at I say."

Then he rode off without once turning his head to look back.

"Thet's good riddance ter bad rubbish," grinned Old Plug Ugly. "But I w'u'd jest mortally liked ter hed a hack at him! I'll lay it in store fer him some other time."

Woods still had a few friends in the party; and Gid could see they thought the man had been misused. They looked doubtfully on young Howland, despite the indorsement of the wearer of the gold-colored gloves. Gid thought it best to tell them how near Jack had been to death administered by the hands of the very men the departing ruffian had accused him of being in league with. Old Plug Ugly explained how Gid had saved Jack at the risk of his own life, and once more the men cheered for the wearer of the gold gloves.

It was learned a man had been dispatched to Jericho for rations, information which was hailed with joy by the hungry men from Pick Pocket.

Most of the men were in favor of waiting for the arrival of the food, and it was finally decided to do so.

The man returned with several companions and two pack-animals bearing enough rations to keep the party twenty-four hours, at least. They brought a bit of news as well.

Blind Bent had become like a madman, raving and praying about his child and cursing the man who had lured her from his side. It grew more and more difficult to control him, and in the end he had struck down his attendant and rushed from the cabin. In some way he secured a horse and was last seen galloping madly along the trail toward Pick Pocket, waving his arms above his head and uttering wild shouts.

"Too bad, too bad!" muttered Plug Ugly, shaking his head, sadly. "Ther pore ole cuss hes gone daft as a March hare. I'll be er wonder ef he's ever seen erg'in. Most likely he'll die wanderin' in ther maountains."

"But did no one follow and attempt to overtake him?" asked Gid.

"Yes, he was pursued," replied the man who had brought the information; "but he eluded them all and escaped. He was last seen on the trail, but they said he must have left it at some point."

A square meal made the entire party feel better, and the blind hunt was resumed with greater ardor. Gid could but confess to himself it was an aimless way of prosecuting the search, but it seemed to be the best thing they could do at the time.

The afternoon was far spent and the sun had dropped behind the western mountains when one of the party espied a strange figure mounted on a horse that wore neither saddle nor bridle. A closer inspection revealed the fact that the figure was the unfortunate father, Blind Bent.

A strategic advance was at once inaugurated, but it almost seemed as if the man could see, as he quickly detected the approach of some one. Then the horse he bestrode flew away with the entire party in pursuit.

It was a hot chase and led them further and further into the wild section. Although they did not know it, the blind man was unconsciously leading them directly toward the second retreat of the Land Sharks.

The shadows of night approached as the chase continued. Now and then the blind man would toss his arms above his head and utter a weird wailing cry that sent uncanny echoes skulking swiftly through the gloom.

Gid had held his own horse in check for a long time so that he should not leave his companions, but discovering that Bent would escape in the darkness if not overtaken, he let Tornado out at his best pace.

But he had already delayed too long. Of a sudden the horse which bore the blind fugitive plunged down a rocky gully scarcely more difficult of descent than the steep down which Desperate Durg had made his mad ride. Gid drew rein at the mouth of the dark cut, listening to the ring of the iron-shod hoofs, both horse and rider having been swallowed in the gloom of the place.

The Man of Grit was soon joined by his companions, and together they listened to the clattering ring of sounds that came up to their ears. Once the wailing cry of the unfortunate man floated back to them, sounding weird and ghost-like and making their blood chill in their veins. Still the ring of the iron hoofs continued, growing fainter and fainter in the distance till they finally died out altogether. Every man drew a deep breath when the sounds could no longer be heard.

"I wonder ef we'll ever set eyes on thet man erg'in?" said the hunchback.

"God only knows!" was Gid's reply.

A short time later they camped for the night.

But their work was not terminated till another day. That night was to prove a tragically eventful one.

Three hours had not passed before the guards stopped a mounted man and woman who proved to be Samuel Slick and the little actress Daisy Wyldove. Both the man and woman seemed delighted upon being brought before the party of searchers, and when questioned by Gid, declared they would gladly lead them into the Land Sharks' cave by a passage unknown to any one save themselves, Slick being the original discoverer. Daisy seemed truly repentant for the part she had taken in the moves of the last twenty-four hours and Slick declared he was tired of serving a master who might take a notion to end his life at any moment.

These stories were received with considerable doubt, but, after questioning the man and woman closely and making them several times repeat what they had told, Goldglove Gid was inclined to believe they were speaking the truth. His companions were ready to depend on his judgment, so an immediate move was made, with Daisy and Slick closely guarded and threatened with instant death if it should prove they had been trying a crooked game.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

DISASTER FOR DESPERATE DURG.

HOLDING Little Buttercup close in his arms, Desperate Durg whispered his passionate avowals of love in her ears, and at the same time declared again and again that he would save her or perish in the attempt.

The beautiful girl's heart was throbbing with a mad hope and excitement that was not unmingled with fear and sudden aversion for the man whom she still believed a hero. There was something about his manner, his passionate words, the burning touch of his lips that warned her of a danger she could not comprehend. Once more she forcibly withdrew herself from his clasp.

"You hurt me, Mr. Durgan!" she whispered, glancing again toward the dark passage where she knew the guards were station-

ed. "You are in danger! If you are discovered by the guards—"

"I will kill the curs instantly!" he hissed. "But everything would be ruined. We should not be able to escape."

"I would manage to cut my way out in some manner and carry you with me. But I do not wish to be detected. I know of a secret entrance to this cave—one of which these wretched outlaws do not dream. It was by that I made my way here, but it was a long time before I found you. I have looked all over the other parts of the great cavern—"

"Did you find Miss Barbara?" asked Zoe, eagerly.

"Barbara who?" exclaimed Durg, as if amazed. "Whom do you mean, little one?"

"Oh, the lady who was captured with me. We were together, but the horrid men parted us."

"Howland—is her name Howland?" came in what appeared to be an excited whisper from the man's lips.

"I believe that is the name."

"Why, I know her! Where is she?"

Zoe described the place as well as she could and urged him to do his best to rescue Barbara. She said she could never leave the cave till Barbara departed with her. The man of a black record chuckled to himself, for that made his future course easy.

"Then I will try to find her," he said.

Then he shook his head, exclaiming:

"No, no! it will not do! I can not leave you here, my darling! You are more to me than all the world! I must aid you to escape, and leave Miss Howland in God's hands."

But Zoe would not hear to that. She could not leave the cave unless Barbara went with her, and she urged Durg to do his best to save her friend.

"But I will have to leave you here alone."

"Never mind me. You can come back when you have found her, and we will all go away together. Go, go! Find her! Leave me here for a time. I shall be brave, for I will know you are coming back. But you must be careful and not be discovered by these wicked men."

The miserable hypocrite promised he would be careful and again and again expressed his regret at having to leave her. Then he clasped her in his arms once more and kissed her. A short time after he was ascending the swaying rope.

With clasped hands and a silent prayer for his safety and success, Zoe watched him till he disappeared in the shadows and the rope ladder was drawn up.

Durg hastened from the spot, chuckling with fiendish glee.

"She is a prize—a prize!" he muttered. "And I have her safe and fast. She is so innocent and so easily deceived! Ha, ha, ha! how finely my game is working! I cannot see Barbara now, for that would spoil everything. Her case must be attended to later on. But I must see Daisy and find out how she takes her situation."

He found out! No sooner did he appear before the little actress then she opened on him with a withering torrent of scorn.

"You are a pretty man!" she cried, her eyes flashing and her head thrown back.

"Is this the way you use those who aid you in your infamous schemes? Oh, you miserable hypocrite! I could scratch your eyes out with a will! You promised that I should not be molested, but how was your promise kept? I have been treated like a squaw by your band of ruffians! They have dared to lay their miserable hands on me—me, me! Oh, but I will get even with you for this! I am sorry I ever had anything to do with you and I am ashamed of the part I took in luring an innocent girl into your vile hands!"

Durg waited quietly till this outburst had quite ended, then he calmly asked:

"Are you done?"

The words provoked the little spitfire into another tempest of fury which seemed to amuse the man.

"You are really quite an actress," he laughed. "But I do not care to witness any more of your playing, so kindly give me a rest. You were brought here by an accident against my orders, but now you are here, you may as well make the best of it."

But Daisy still threatened.

"I care nothing for your wild talk," he said, quietly. "But you have showed me

the treachery in your nature, and I think perhaps it will be well to keep you a captive for a time. It will not be long before you cannot harm me if you wish. I shall notify the guards to look out sharp for you, and if you attempt to sneak out you may get damaged. Catch?"

"Yes, I catch. But let me tell you this: I will escape you in some way, and I will live to make you sorry you ever saw me. You have not kept your word with me in any way."

"You are mistaken. I have kept my part of the bargain to the letter, for I saw your fat husband hanged by the neck to-day till he was dead, dead, dead."

With a few more words he turned and left her; but he did not dream in how short a time, with the aid of a traitor to the band, she would bring disaster and death upon him.

Night had shrouded the earth again outside the great cave when it was announced to Captain Shark that two prisoners had been taken while prowling about in the vicinity of the cavern. He ordered them brought into his presence, but he uttered an oath of amazement when the darky, Ginger, and his master, Lord Alfred Dumly stood before him.

"This is an infernal insult!" gurgled milord, although he trembled in every limb as he gazed upon the masked figure into whose presence he had been escorted. "Hi ham a subject hof the Queen, hand Hi want you to know you will ave to suffer for interfering with me! Hi never saw such a blawsted bloody country for ruffians and 'ighway-men hany'ow!"

"Fo' de Lawd's sakes!" whispered the negro. "Yo's got an awful mouf on yo', milawd! It am sart'in shore ter git us kilt dead in de en'l!"

The masked chief waved his hand.

"Take them away and guard them closely," he ordered. "We will kill them when we want some amusement."

Ginger nearly fell to the ground in terror and Lord Alfred choked and gurgled so he could not utter a word.

When they had disappeared, the captain of the Land Sharks sprung to his feet, muttering:

"That man escaped in a remarkable manner, for I thought he was as good as finished before we left him. That is a failure after I supposed the case was off my hands. Can it be everything I have undertaken will go back on me in such a manner at the very moment I seem to be the most triumphant? I have a presentiment— But, bah! I do not believe in presentiments only at the gaming table. I am a trifle unnerved by want of sleep. I must get some rest."

A short time later he was fast asleep, apparently quite safe with his men all around him.

Midnight came.

There were strange subdued sounds in the cavern, there were black mysterious figures moving cautiously over the rocky floor, there were guarded whisperings. And then—

The loud report of a revolver rung out!

As if the sound had been a signal, a savage cheer of manly voices made the echoes reverberate through the underground arches. Then came a rattle of shots and a pandemonium of sounds that sent dagger-thrusts of terror to the hearts of the amazed Land Sharks.

Disaster had overtaken Desperate Durg at last!

CHAPTER XXXIX

A SATISFACTORY CONCLUSION IS DEPICTED. LIGHTS flashed up in the cavern, the shouts of the attacking party were answered by yells of mingled fear and defiance from the Land Sharks, the reports of small-arms made a roar in that underground retreat like the discharge of artillery, the smoke of battle began to gather, making the forms of the men as they rushed and struggled here and there seem like grim demons of some horrible phantasmagoria.

Goldglove Gid and his followers had been led into the cave by Samuel Slick and the little actress, and the desperadoes were taken by surprise and at an advantage. Still Desperate Durg uttered a wild rallying cry and sought to muster his followers to beat off their foes.

In answer to his cry a loud yell rung

through the underground arches—a yell that was so fierce, so weird, so blood-chilling in its terrible intensity that there seemed to be an instant lull in the battle so savagely inaugurated.

"Where is the wretch who stole my child from me—my little Zoe? I heard his voice! I know it, though I only heard it once before. God direct me to him!"

It was Blind Bent! How he came there no man could say. Had some unseen hand guided the sightless maniac to the man who would have destroyed his child? It almost seemed so, for, although he could not see, he rushed straight upon Desperate Durg.

The desperado chief heard the man's voice and whirled to meet him, a knife gleaming in his hand. But as he drew back his arm to strike at Bent with murderous intentions, the blind man rushed full against him, hurling him to the floor.

He struck fairly on his own knife, uttered a horrible cry of mingled pain, rage and despair, then rolled over upon his back and lay still with his life-blood ebbing fast away.

The hand of Justice, with a wronged father as its medium, had struck him down.

When the Land Sharks saw their leader fall, the most of them threw down their arms and surrendered. Some of them made a rush to escape, and a few succeeded.

Goldglove Gid hurried toward the spot where his bitter enemy had fallen. He saw Bent grope around blindly with his arms outstretched, stumble against Durg's prostrate form, then fall on his knees by the doomed man's side and fasten his hands upon the wretch's throat.

Leaping forward, Gid tore the blind man's hands away, exclaiming:

"Easy, man, easy! He has received the length of his own knife already, and the chances are your further assistance in disposing of him will not be needed."

Durg opened his eyes and looked around wildly, then with a great effort, he uttered:

"You are right, Gordan; I have got it for good. My premonition was correct, and in the hour of my greatest triumph disaster and death has come upon me. The game is lost, and so is my miserable black soul! This is the true reward of crookedness and sin!"

With a mighty struggle, he lifted himself upon his elbow and glared around. Only to fall back with a bitter groan.

"Your triumph is complete," he said, his breath beginning to come more quickly as the red pool upon the floor grew wider. "But—quick! I have a confession to make before I die! I am going fast! Barbara, Barbara! where is she?"

"She is here," replied Jack Howland, as he appeared with his sister on one arm and Little Buttercup on the other.

With a shriek of joy Zoe rushed into her father's arms. He clasped her tight and held her close, covering her face with kisses, crying brokenly:

"Is it you, my child—oh, my God! is it you? If I could only see! I can scarcely believe I have you safe in my arms again! Has God been so kind to a poor old blind man? Oh, my child, my darling child!"

Sobbing and laughing hysterically, little Zoe replied:

"Yes, yes, yes! it is really and truly me, you dear old daddy! We are safe together again, and we will never again be separated—never, never, never!"

Gid bent over Desperate Durg, after his eyes had met for a single instant those of the woman he had once loved so truly.

"Let me look at your wound, Boderick," he said. "Perhaps something can be done to check this flow of blood."

"No," gasped the unfortunate villain; "everything would be useless. I have but a few moments to live. Let me talk—let me confess! I must confess!"

But before he could go on, another interruption occurred. Old Plug Ugly came forward, escorting Daisy Wyldove.

"I reckoned as how ye might want this yere piece o' femininity, Gid," observed the hunchback, grimly. "As she wuz fer slidin' out on ther sly, I clapped my claws on her an' retained her fer ther time."

"'Anged hif that isn't my wife, b'Jove!" exclaimed a voice, and Lord Alfred waddled out of the darkness, followed by Ginger. "Hi ham jammed glad to see ye, y'know!"

"Yar, I 'spec' dat am a fac'!" grinned the darky. "Hope I'll git dat little bill he owes me now."

Daisy uttered a shriek of dismay and stared at the man as if she saw a ghost.

"Why, why, I thought you were dead!" she gasped.

"Well, Hi ham blawsted far from being in such a bloody hunpleasant condition. Come to these loving harms, my darling."

And before Daisy could escape, he had clasped her fast.

"Golly, ain't dat sweet!" chuckled Ginger, cutting a caper.

Gid waved his hand to Old Plug Ugly.

"Take them away and let them go wherever they choose."

Already valuable time had been lost, for Durg was growing weak with great rapidness. He motioned for Barbara to approach.

"You must hear what I say," he gasped. "I will tell it—in a few words, for I can not stop for details. It was not Gordan whom—you married that night—under the trees by the river."

She clasped her hands over her heart, and grew deathly white, as she faintly repeated:

"Not Gordan—not Gordan? Then who—"

"Listen—bend lower—my voice is failing. He thought me his friend; I was his enemy. I loved you desperately, but I kept the secret—of my passion safe in my heart. It was I who—planned the secret marriage—and I induced Gordan to consent—to it. I made him believe it the—only way he could—ever obtain you. On account of the feud—your father would never consent. I was working for myself; my plot was already in my head. The time for the marriage—was set. A little before it I lured Gordan away—to New Orleans. There I drugged him with a decoction—given me by an old—negro woman. She said—it would make him—forgetful for weeks. He would be—sick—and would not be able—to tell his name—or where he belonged. The vile decoction worked—as she said it would. I—I hurried back—and arrived home in time—for the wedding. I did not dare see you—by day—for you could easily—tell us apart then. You know how much—we looked alike—before I colored my hair—and mustache. People often mistook one—for the other. I sent you a note—saying I would be at the spot chosen—and signed your lover's name. I was—there in his stead—and in the darkness—you married me instead of Gideon Gordan!"

Barbara uttered a low cry and nearly swooned only recovering herself with a powerful effort.

The dying man was given a swallow of whisky and continued with renewed strength:

"The marriage was a sham; it was not legal. But I had a certificate made out and signed, taking care you did not get a look at my face. I was in terror lest you should detect the imposition—and I dared not remain with you long. I left you as soon as I possibly could and hurried to New Orleans. There I found Gordan in a hospital—and I showed him the certificate with my name—and yours upon it. I told him you had been deceiving him—all the time. I told him we had met secretly—scores of times while he—thought you loved him with all your heart. I told him you had always intended to marry me. He raved and said—he would kill us both—when he got up. I left him and hurried back to Kentucky to perfect my desperate scheme."

Once more he paused a moment, then went on, his voice sinking to a whisper again:

"You know what that scheme was—Barbara. I did my best—to make you believe—your husband had—deserted you. I did my best—to induce you to fly from your home—with me. I failed. But, when Gid did not—return and seek—an explanation—I resolved to possess you, anyway. I would—make you believe—he was dead;—then you would marry—me. You know what I did—to carry out—the plot. I have not the strength—to go over it all. The trinkets I professed to—have taken from Gid's dead body—I took from him after he was drugged. I failed—in that. I lured you—into this country—resolved to possess you—by fair means—or foul. I have failed again. All my—evil plans have been—thwarted."

After a brief silence, during which he

caught his breath in spasmodic gasps, he faintly whispered:

"Barbara—Gid—I wish you would—take each other's hands."

Once more the eyes of the cruelly parted lovers met; then Gid held out his hand, the light of a great happiness breaking across his manly face. And the woman he loved placed her trembling fingers within his grasp, not shrinkingly or hesitantly but with the confidence of a glad heart.

"There," whispered the dying man, "it is—all right now. You will—be happy—for all of—the plots—of miserable, wicked Helos Boderick. But," he shrieked, starting up with a last mighty effort, "if there is a hell—God have mercy on my wretched soul!"

Then he fell back dead!

The Land Sharks who were captured received their just deserts at the hands of Judge Lynch. Among the few who escaped was Samuel Slick, but Hustler Hank and Pious Dick shared the fate of their comrades in crime.

Daisy Wyldove, Lord Alfred Dumly and his colored valet disappeared together and were never again seen in Jericho. Whether a reconciliation was effected between the little actress and her corpulent husband is not known.

The dying confession of Helos Boderick removed the last vestige of the clouds which had separated Gideon Gordan and Barbara Howland, and in due time they were happily married, with Old Plug Ugly an honored guest at the wedding.

The time came when Jack proposed to little Zoe and was accepted. The little singer gave up all thoughts of ever going on the stage, and in a contented, happy home life, with her blind "daddy" in a corner by the fireside, was happier than a Patti.

THE END.

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